Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks

Dublin Castle 12-13 March 2013
Caisleán Bhaile Átha Cliath 12-13 Márta 2013
Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks

Dearbhú Cáilíochta i gCreataí Cáilíochtaí
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Preface

Dear Colleagues

The conference ‘Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks’ hosted by QQI in Dublin last March as part of the Irish Presidency, resulted in much rich reflection and ultimately, in eleven specific action-oriented conclusions. This document presents the papers prepared generously by panellists in response to Dr Jim Murray’s Issues Paper, transcriptions of the panel and plenary discussions over the duration of the conference and, finally, notes from the breakout workshops, all of which form the substance of the conference conclusions.

QQI is grateful to all participants, but in particular, to the panellists, who were willing to contribute in such an open way before and during the event, and to the Chairs and rapporteurs who led workshops generously and with a clear focus on the practical challenges arising from the four themes of the conference- the integration of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks, using quality assurance frameworks to improve the integration of education and training systems, promoting the labour market relevance of qualifications, facilitating the validation of formal and informal learning, and finally, promoting confidence in Europe’s qualifications on a global scale. We also acknowledge the wisdom, financial and practical support of the Commission and of the Department of Education and Skills, in both the conference preparation and management. We thank the delegates whose focussed expertise brought such depth to discussions and ultimately to the conference conclusions.

Finally, I thank Andrina Wafer and Hugh Sullivan for their work on editing these proceedings for publication.

The conclusions note that European qualifications frameworks can facilitate the comparison and recognition of qualifications across Europe on the basis of mutual trust. Trust is consolidated by strong quality assurance systems. Our shared goal remains that qualifications are fit for purpose, and that those holding qualifications can perform the tasks that society proposes for them, including participating in lifelong learning, working as employees or creating new employment for themselves and others.

In Ireland, we say: ‘Ní neart go chur le chéile’ – our strength lies in co-operation. In that spirit, it is with pleasure that I invite you to reflect again on these expert deliberations and to consider the implications for your work both at national and European level.

Dr Padraig Walsh
Chief Executive, QQI
Chapter 1

Introduction

This report presents the proceedings of the conference ‘Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks’ hosted by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) on the 12 and 13 March 2013 in Dublin Castle, as part of the Irish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. It is designed to be read in conjunction with the conference publication, Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks.

It includes the purpose of the conference, its methodology and running order as well as submissions received in advance of the conference. A detailed and faithful record of the proceedings of the conference is then set out, leading to the conference conclusions.

Conference Aims and Objectives

The aim of the conference was to explore how qualifications frameworks and quality assurance arrangements can best work together at a national and European level in order to achieve the goals of reform in education across the EU and within its member states.

It explored four principle themes:

• Integrating Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks to improve education and training systems.
• Using Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks to improve the labour market relevance of qualifications.
• Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning.
• Promoting confidence in Europe’s qualifications on a global scale.

Over 150 delegates from across the EU and other global regions, came together to discuss, debate and ultimately contribute to the production of a report and statement, which would be used to inform policy and reflection at a European and national level. The Conference Statement is a contribution towards the further development of the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) and diverse National Frameworks of Qualifications integrating quality assurance systems within development.

Conference Methodology

An issues paper*, written by Jim Murray, Director of Academic Affairs with Institutes of Technology Ireland was published in advance of the conference. The paper outlined and raised key issues for consideration around the interaction between quality assurance systems and qualifications frameworks on the four conference themes. A group of experts representing particular sectors and groups of stakeholders were invited to give written responses to the relevant questions and issues raised in the paper. (Chapter 2)

The conference began with introductory addresses by QQI, the Irish Department of Education and Skills, the European Commission and a keynote address by Jim Murray. A combination of panel discussions, Q&A sessions and plenary table discussions facilitated by QQI staff were used to explore the themes and address specific questions. Breakout workshops followed, tasked with proposing how the issues raised during the conference could be addressed in individual member states and across the EU.

The issues raised, points made and solutions proposed became the basis of the final Conference Statement which is the principle outcome of the conference.

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<td>Registration</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>SESSION 1</strong></td>
<td>Chairperson: Gordon Clark, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)</td>
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<td>09.00-09.20</td>
<td>Opening Address from the Presidency of the European Council</td>
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<td>Seán Ó Foghlu, Secretary General, Department of Education and Skills, Ireland</td>
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<td>09.20-09.45</td>
<td>Opening Address from the European Commission</td>
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<td>Xavier Prats Monné, Deputy Director-General for Education and Culture</td>
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<td>09.45-10.30</td>
<td>Keynote Presentation</td>
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<td>10.30-11.00</td>
<td>Coffee Break</td>
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<td><strong>SESSION 2</strong></td>
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<td>Integrating quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to improve education and training systems</td>
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<td>Reactions: Lucien Bollaert, Netherlands/Flanders Accreditation Organisation; Sean Feerick, European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET) Secretariat; Mile Dzemailija, University of Split, Croatia; Jens Bjornavold, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP)</td>
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<td>12.30-14.00</td>
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<td>Using quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to promote the labour market relevance of qualifications</td>
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<td>Reactions: Mike Coles, Curriculum and Qualifications Development Expert, UK; Kevin Marshall, Microsoft; Thomas Mayr, European Association of Craft Small and Medium-sized Enterprises, (UEAPME)</td>
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<td>Reactions: Külli All, Ministry of Education and Research, Estonia; Patrick Werquin, Qualifications Policy Expert, France; Christine Wihak, Thompson Rivers University, Canada; Michel Feutrie, European Civil Society Platform for Lifelong Learning (EUCIS-LLL)</td>
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<td>16.45-17.00</td>
<td>Introduction to Draft Presidency Statement</td>
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<td>Bryan Maguire, Head of Qualifications Services, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)</td>
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<td>19.30</td>
<td>Evening Reception, followed by Dinner, with entertainment by Music Generation</td>
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<td>Padraig Walsh, CEO, Quality and Qualifications Ireland, (QQI): Challenges identified, resulting in challenges for workshop groups to resolve (based on overnight analysis of work in Day 1)</td>
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<td><strong>Promoting confidence in Europe’s qualifications on a global scale</strong></td>
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<td>Reactions: Eva Cheng, Qualifications Framework Secretariat, Hong Kong; Mohamed Slassi Sennou, General Confederation of Moroccan Business, Morocco; Karine Harutyunyan, Deputy Minister of Education and Science, Armenia; Allan Brüün Pedersen, Agency for Universities and Internationalisation, Denmark</td>
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<td>10.45-11.15</td>
<td>Coffee</td>
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## SESSION 5 | Bringing home the lessons |
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<td>Participants in five parallel workshops will discuss how the issues raised at the conference can be addressed, in their countries and at European level, to support the integrated implementation of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance</td>
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<td>Chairs: Sjur Bergan, Head, Education Department, Council of Europe; Sophie Weisswange, Principal Administrator/VET Policy Adult Learning Unit B.3, DGEAC; Mike Coles, Curriculum and Qualifications Development Expert; Ana Carla Pereira, Head of Unit A.3, DGEAC, Skills and Qualifications Strategies, Multilingualism Policy, European Commission; Tony Donohoe, Head of Education, Social and Innovation Policy, Irish Business and Employers Confederation</td>
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<td>12.30-12.45</td>
<td>Presentation of Presidency Statement</td>
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<td>Gordon Clark, Chairperson, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)</td>
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<td>Ana Carla Pereira, Head of Unit A.3, DGEAC, Skills and Qualifications Strategies, Multilingualism Policy, European Commission</td>
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Chapter 2

Responses to the issues paper

In advance of the Conference, panellists were invited to submit their responses to the position paper by Jim Murray. These responses are included below.

Seán Feerick, EQAVET Secretariat

Introduction

The relationship between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance approaches has been a priority of the work undertaken in the EQAVET network since 2010 through its work on developing a matrix of the quality assurance procedures in the processes of certification, curricula setting, accreditation and training of trainers in European VET systems. This exercise provided a basis for a more intensive collaboration with the EQF and ECVET in organising, in 2011, a joint seminar which examined the question of the contribution of the EU tools (EQF, ECVET, EQAVET) to the definition and re-definition of learning-outcomes-based standards, and a follow-up seminar in 2012 on the question of using units within professional qualifications. In 2013 EQAVET will work closely with higher education specialists in organising with CEDEFOP an expert seminar on the quality assurance approaches used in both VET and higher education.

When reflecting on the relationship between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance it is important to remember that, particularly in the area of VET, the impetus for work across quality assurance and qualifications frameworks has been driven at the policy level by the follow-up of the Copenhagen Process and the successive Europe 2010 and 2020 follow-up programmes. The Bruges Communiqué of 2010 provides a 10 year agenda for work in VET with a series of strategic objectives linked to improving quality, making lifelong learning and mobility a reality, enhancing creativity, innovation and entrepreneurship and promoting equity, social cohesion and active citizenship. These strategic objectives are supported by shorter-term concrete deliverables which have a direct impact on the way we should take forward work on qualifications and quality assurance of VET in a lifelong learning context.

As the key-note paper states: Rethinking Education “represents a call for a swifter and deeper follow-through on reforms, particularly in relation to the provision of the right skills for employability”.

The relationship between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance tools and/or approaches is driven by a policy context both within Member States and at EU level which requires a greater degree of convergence in developing approaches to implementing EU tools which deliver results for the learner in a European and indeed global space for lifelong learning.

Some general comments on the relationship between quality assurance and qualifications:

- Mutual trust in the quality of qualifications is essential if progress is to be made in terms of promoting mobility of learners and workers across Europe, developing concrete lifelong learning strategies and advancing in terms of developing a European area for VET and for HE.

- Quality assurance goes beyond procedures and technical approaches to looking at whether qualifications or certification and/or accreditation processes are fit for purpose. Effective quality assurance implies a culture of quality assurance and a multi-level approach to quality management involving all appropriate stakeholders. The EQAVET Framework and perspective on quality assurance are based on a quality cycle which addresses both the system and the provider level. This is above all an evolving approach. As confidence is strengthened between key stakeholders, approaches are deepened and

1 The information gathering Matrix and the policy briefs and reports relating to the joint seminars are available on http://www.eqavet.eu/gns/library/publications/2011.aspx
mutual learning at European level delivers its impact in individual Member State contexts. This is of particular importance in strengthening approaches to developing greater links with the work of employment particularly through workplace learning.

- It is difficult to agree with the contention that qualifications frameworks and associated tools come from a broader set of policy objectives related to “mobility, employment and system coherence”. Quality assurance needs to be seen as an underpinning principle of qualifications frameworks. Confidence in the quality assurance of qualifications ensures that learners/trainees and employers trust qualifications and that qualifications facilitate mobility and progress within and between education and training systems. Qualifications frameworks and quality assurance need to be seen holistically.

- A key issue in examining the relationship between qualifications and quality assurance is that of language. There is a need for a shared language and definition of concepts which is readable across a diversity of education and training systems. The work undertaken in ESCO but also in the “softer” approaches of joint collaborative work on concrete projects between EQF, ECVET and EQAVET helps considerably in this respect. This is something which will need to deepen over the coming years in order to strengthen mutual understanding not only of qualifications but also the quality assurance processes underpinning them.

- When looking at European qualifications across systems, it is important to understand the diversity of VET in comparison to higher education. While work has commenced in terms of increasing cooperation in relation to approaches to quality assurance much more needs to be done. The revision of the European Standards and Guidelines can provide a useful basis for taking forward this work.

- The implementation of EQAVET across Member States is beginning to provide us with a profile of how quality assurance is supported at European level and, notwithstanding the diversity which exists, to see the emergence of a common European approach to strengthening understanding of the quality assurance approaches underpinning qualifications. This is important at a global level where international interlocutors address the EQAVET network as a source of understanding how quality assurance of VET is managed at European level.

**More detailed comments on how quality assurance and qualifications frameworks can improve education and training systems:**

At a more specific level there are four aspects of quality assurance that are key for the improvement of education and training systems and are crucial in the development of qualification frameworks. Many of these areas are addressed by the work to be undertaken in EQAVET through its working groups and peer learning activities as part of its work programme 2013-2015. These are quality assurance processes that underline:

1. **The certification of learning outcomes (assessment, validation and recognition processes).**
2. **The development of curricula that are more responsive to labour market needs.** The importance of establishing sustainable cooperation structures with social partners, in particular with businesses, as they contribute to funding and delivering of workplace learning, make VET more effective, relevant and responsive to the labour market.
3. **The establishment of transparent and standards based accreditation systems for VET providers and programmes – accreditation of VET providers.**
4. **The quality of teachers and trainers and other categories of VET personnel – training of teachers and trainers.**

**More detailed comments on how qualifications frameworks and quality assurance arrangements can best work together at national and European levels in order to achieve the overall goals of reforming education.**

Each qualification defined within the NQF should:

- Be referenced to a specific level on the EQF.
• Consist of sets of learning outcomes (knowledge, skills and competencies – including key competencies).
• Be recognised and validated no matter in what context it was acquired (formal, non-formal and informal).
• Be the result of negotiation with the main stakeholders (mainly the social partners) in all phases of its development (planning, implementation, evaluation and review) – utilising the model offered by EQAVET.
• Be organised in “credit points” recognised at sector and, if possible (mainly for the key competencies) at trans-sector levels.
• Be recorded in one or several components of the Europass portfolio.
• Specify the occupations (as defined in NSCO/ESCO) the possessor is able to perform.

Lucien Bollaert, Netherlands/Flanders Accreditation Organisation (NVAO)

NVAO reflections and (short) answers to questions

Preliminary remark

There are too many combined questions to be answered in 10 minutes!

Theme 1 – Integrating Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks to improve education and training systems

1.1 What role(s) do or should national quality assurance bodies play in the implementation of NQFs?

(Inter)national external quality assurance bodies or agencies should play a crucial role in the implementation of NQFs on several levels.

As far as the self-certification or verification and referencing are concerned an independent foreign external quality assurance agency can best coordinate the report on the link between the national and European QF. The national quality assurance agency(s) should be interviewed as they can perform the translation from the European intended learning outcomes (LO) to the national ones.

Once the NQF is established the national quality assurance agency or accreditation body could validate – that is, decide on the level of the intended LOs of the disciplines or domains within the NQF. This validation should be underpinned by matrices indicating how the programme descriptors or LOs are covered by the discipline LOs. This is considered good practice within the NVAO in Flanders. The accreditation body or quality assurance agency can also manage the register in which the LOs are kept and linked to the study programmes.

If accreditation or assessment is done on the level of study programmes the national accreditation body or quality assurance agency also assesses externally the ways in which the intended LO of the programmes cover those of the discipline and those of the NQF if the programme is not yet validated.

Last but not least the external QA should be assessed to ascertain the degree to which (and how) the intended LOs are actually achieved. The heart of EQA is accurately assessing/reviewing whether (and how) what is observed realises what was intended. Quality (in education) is the difference between the input, being the intended LOs, and the output, being the achieved ones. The “how” refers to the process and is the subject of enhancement.

1.2 How do NQFs affect the balance between accountability and enhancement that lie at the heart of quality assurance activities?

NQFs do or should support accountability. They are built on minimum or threshold standards that define the levels or cycles. These standards must be met as a minimum to award the qualification otherwise all trust is lost. If the NQF intermediate levels or “stepping stones” between levels or towards excellence are defined then the NQF can add value both for the learner and for the institutions and programmes in the formulation of its intended LOs.
Internal and external QA can take action or make suggestions respectively to enhance the process of achieving the goals, using the LOs as minimum standards.

1.3 What in your view are the main QA methods that promote NQF implementation and how do we assess their effectiveness?

In Europe there is a lot of diversity in QA methods and their links to NQFs. The most crucial, central and essential link is through the LOs. Both internal and external QA should deal with the LOs, both intended and achieved, and their link with the NQF. It is good practice that QA should be involved in standard setting for the NQF, its certification and the validation of the discipline-specific LOs in the NQF afterwards.

It is crucial to assess the effectiveness of the NQF through the realisation of its LOs by institutions and programmes. Internal and external QA are both assessing this and organising follow-up measures to enhance quality (as prescribed by the ESG). It would be good if both quality assurance agencies and the national contact-points of the European QFs co-produced systems of discipline-wide analyses.

1.4 What can the VET and HE sectors learn from each other both in relation to QA practice generally and its role in the implementation of NQFs?

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<th>HE can learn:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Provision for short-term employability.</td>
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<td>Provision for (short-term) skills.</td>
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<td>Adult &amp; distance learning (LLL).</td>
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<td>Experiential &amp; dual learning.</td>
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<td>Recognition of informal &amp; non-formal learning.</td>
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<th>VET can learn:</th>
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<tr>
<td>Independence, autonomy &amp; ownership (as opposed to controlling inspection).</td>
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<td>Long term critical thinking, research &amp; innovation.</td>
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<td>Stakeholder consultation model.</td>
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<td>IQA enhancement driven &amp; EQA accountability.</td>
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<td>International dimensions &amp; mobility.</td>
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1.5 Should quality co-ordinating bodies at the European level work more closely together in the interest of promoting consistent implementation of learning outcomes-based NQFs and improving education and training? Should they also work more closely with the QF-EHEA and EQF co-ordinating bodies?

Surely, even taking into consideration national competence on education (except professional education) and the diversity within the EHEA, this should be an important input into the revision of the ESG. There is a clear need to find a fundamental and pragmatic synergy between the processes (Bologna and Copenhagen). The bodies and organisations, their structures and their QA around international quality of education and training as concretised in the LOs in order to give an answer to the global challenges of society.

Theme 2 – Using Quality Assurance to promote/improve the labour market relevance of qualifications

2.1 Are the reforms envisaged in Rethinking Education, particularly in relation to the provision of the right skills for employability, sufficiently embedded conceptually in existing European qualifications and QA policy or are further concepts and structures required?

I think there first needs to be a common concept or definition of “competence” and “skill”. In pedagogy the term “competence” is widely used for “the integration of knowledge, skills and attitudes in a specific context(s)”. Neither on the European level nor on the national level (NQFs) is the concept used in the same way. It is urgent that the various stakeholders of education and training use the same conception, notwithstanding the clear but different definitions, in order to correctly implement it in programmes, recognition of degrees and learning units, whether formal, informal or non-formal.

There seems to be less emphasis on the need to achieve basic (key) competences, particular short-term competences towards employability and transversal competences both for LLL and for long-term contextual functioning and research and innovation. The stress seems to be too much on skills as far as employability is concerned and too little on attitudes. Underlying transversal
characteristics such as curiosity, critical and analytical approach, flexibility and (taking) responsibility seem to be more attitude-driven than skills. Yet, they are more and more sought after for by employers facing the need for knowledge and innovation on a global scale.

NQFs seem to implement a check-list methodology. The ultimate realisation of the necessary competences is situated within the triangle of learner, teacher and learning environment. This means that certainly those stakeholders, but all the others as well, should be involved not only in checking, but more and more in realising those competences in an underlying quality culture.

NQFs seem to be too inspired by national educational structures instead of by the contents. Structures that still make a difference between academic, professional and vocational learning forget that the competences needed form a necessary continuum.

2.2 What roles can national qualifications and QA bodies in coordinating engagement between labour market actors and education and training providers?

NQF (bodies) and QA bodies can play an important role in engaging both the labour market actors and the education and training providers (see picture 1 below). They should do so on each platform that they operate on. Thus education and training providers should incorporate labour market actors in formulating intended LOs, shaping the educational process or programmes (e.g. internship, guest speakers, etc.) and assessing the achieved LOs. Institutions should incorporate labour market actors into their research and into their model of governance (on both short and long-term contracts). QA bodies should engage labour market actors on their assessment panels as well as into the validation of the intended LOs and the recognition of achieved LOs.

2.3 How can social partners contribute to the QA of education and training and the implementation of NQFs?

See previous response.

Theme 3 – QA and QFs in facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning

3.1 Could the European-level actors identify, while making allowance for national specificities, the optimal approaches to documenting, identifying, assessing and certifying learning in validation? Or is this an unrealistic ambition?

All the European actors should open dialogue among themselves together with their national bodies to develop a robust methodology of documenting (managing registers), identifying (formulating), assessing and certifying LOs. There are certainly some good practices, e.g. the formulation of discipline-specific LOs by the institutions together with a compulsory check by the labour market actors and international experts, the validation of discipline-specific LOs by the accreditation body (e.g. NVAO) and the formulation and assessment of programme-specific LOs.
by internal and external QA, including accreditation.

This European platform should play an important role in identifying good practice, facilitating shared learning and striving towards a common methodology.

This should be an important input into the revision of the ESG.

3.2 What are the risks and barriers to opening up NQFs to validation of non-formal and informal learning?

There is certainly a robust, thus trustworthy methodology needed. This methodology should take into consideration both VET training and formal education experiences. It is important that it is done by an independent body, preferably a national one, while consulting the providers as far as content is concerned. A robust methodology should incorporate not only the European and national descriptors and indicators, but also levels and indicators in between, both generic or transversal and specific or contextual. The assessment should in any case be integrative. It should end up with recognition of competences on which providers/study programmes can identify and decide on exemption of units/modules of the study programme to get the qualification. These exemptions should be based on the achieved competences and not on the contents of programmes. Thus NQFs can play an important part in supporting this methodology while focusing on competences and not on national educational structures or systems and incorporating layers or stepping stones in-between the levels or cycles. Although the decision on the exemptions is taken by the provider there should be a national system for making appeals. Last but not least there should also be an IQA and independent EQA on validation of non-formal and informal learning!

3.3 Does validation of non-formal and informal learning transfer from VET to HE and the other way around and both towards LLL in the way described in 3.2.

3.4 Are national or centralised public QA and qualifications bodies too closely-linked to the formal education and training systems, and does this diminish their capacity to operate validation systems in a sufficiently flexible manner?

This can’t be answered in the same and overall way on the European level. There is too much diversity and difference in practice. To prevent overly close links with formal education there needs to be a dialogue and co-operation among all the stakeholders: labour market actors and learners as well as the representatives of the national policies included, but also amongst the different existing bodies. There needs to be a dialogue building trust and co-operation among all stakeholders, EQA bodies and providers with their IQA as well. There should be a clear policy and commitment by all that standards count and not just structures, systems or formal education or training. Do not forget the cultural dimension of the different actors as well as the quality culture of organisations.

Theme 4 – Promoting confidence in Europe’s qualifications on a global scale

4.1 Has the implementation of QA arrangements and QF generated more confidence internationally in the skills available in European countries? If so, what particular factors have contributed to this?

The more the LOs or competences are described on each level (international, national, institution, programme, units) in a robust and comprehensive methodology publicly, and at the same time internal and external QA assesses them in an independent, robust and transparent way, the more the LOs are trusted. This has already become clear in the way Tuning and ESG have entered the global environment.

On the other hand since economy and education; society in fact, has gone global; there is also global competition. Similar to the Copenhagen and Bologna processes, the 2020 Strategy also has Europe central to it.
The goal is to be the best through building the education and training that responds best to the global challenges. While there is co-operation worldwide, there is also competition.

Let’s not forget that everything, certainly education and training, is strongly culturally influenced. The diversity within Europe is large. It is even larger at a global level (see 4.3).

4.2 Is the emerging European area for skills and qualifications, heralded in Rethinking Education, being delivered in a way that promotes global recognition and mobility?

Global recognition and mobility are incorporated in the methodology. Yet, their promotion is impeded by the fact that (inter)national recognition of competences and qualifications is not prominent in Europe. The recognition of VET qualifications is not fluently accepted by HE, even nationally. The recognition of non-formal and informal learning is not well-accepted by formal education. Formal education is still reluctant to recognise competences gained through training.

4.3 How should Europe respond to the global development in QFs and QA? Should it insist on a consistent approach or recognise the inevitability of diversity? Do you think that global levels are a good idea?

Europe should open up to the global development in QFs and QA as the global dimension becomes more prominent. It should do so not looking down from Europe as a fortress, but through open dialogue and co-operation from the concept of learning from each other, taking into consideration the (socio-economic, political and cultural) diversity. Global levels for the basic and higher competences would be an important step forward in responding to the global challenges. Yet, how and when (at what age) they are realised as checked by QA will be diverse because of the diverse contexts.

4.4 How can countries external to the EU/EEA or EHEA signal their affinity with EQF and QF-EHEA? Does formal alignment of an external NQF to an EQF-referenced European NQF, or to a European NQF self-certified as compatible to the QF-EHEA, establish a de facto alignment between the international NQF and EQF or QF-EHEA?

International NQF can make contact with the EU/EEA or EHEA bodies/secretariats. The formal alignment of the international NQF should be made in the same methodology of referencing or verifying, making use of external quality assurance agencies. Nevertheless the actual achievement of LOs in study programmes as checked by internal QA and external QA based on ESG would be the ultimate proof that the external NQF really works and can be trusted instead of only being a paperwork exercise. The same applies to the European NQFs.

4.5 How relevant is the European experience in terms of supporting NQF developments in emergent democracies?

This experience is relevant since it should make us think of our own QFs and the way they are culturally determined.

Jens Bjornavold, CEDEFOP

Introduction

This note argues that the rapid emergence of learning outcomes based qualifications frameworks requires a shift in the focus of quality assurance arrangements. Existing quality assurance arrangements are seen as focussing too much on the provider and the teaching and training inputs and underestimate the certification process and its opening towards learning outcomes. A future challenge for quality assurance arrangements is thus to combine and balance the focus on education and training inputs with a stronger attention to learning outcomes.

Quality assurance as a pre-condition for trusted qualifications and qualifications frameworks

A qualification must be trusted to be of any value. The extent to which certificates or diplomas can be exchanged for employment or further education largely depends on the credibility of the awarding institution and the learning outcomes achieved.
by the individual having completed the program and passed the required tests. Systematic quality assurance arrangements increasingly underpin this trust. Education and training institutions without transparent and clearly documented quality assurance arrangements risk finding themselves in the company of ‘fake qualifications’ which are increasingly being promoted on the internet.

The issue of trust is also fundamental to the ongoing implementation of qualifications framework across Europe. The aim of qualifications frameworks is to make it easier for individuals to use qualifications across institutional and national borders. While this fundamentally requires the description of qualifications and qualifications levels through learning outcomes, it is also linked to the existence of transparent and systematic quality assurance arrangements making it possible to judge whether there's a real value attached to the paper presented by a candidate.

Box 1: European level linkages between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance

The 2008 EQF Recommendation lays out in Annex III the principles of quality assurance that must underpin the implementation of the Framework. This has been taken forward in the 10 criteria governing the referencing of national qualification frameworks to EQF. Criterion 5 and 6 explicitly refers to the need to document existing quality assurance arrangements, explicitly underlining the importance of these for ensuring the trust towards the comparison of national qualifications frameworks. The 2009 Recommendation on the European Quality assurance reference framework for vocational education and training (EQAVET) furthermore states that the framework should ‘support the implementation of EQF, in particular the quality of the certification of learning outcome'.

The focus of existing quality assurance systems

While there is broad agreement on the need to connect ‘the three Qs’ – qualifications, qualifications frameworks and quality assurance – the precise character of this relationship requires more attention. It can be argued that the overall shift to learning outcomes now taking place across European education and training systems along with the rapid implementation of comprehensive qualification frameworks requires a rethinking of the way quality assurance systems are focused. This becomes clear when looking at the way the EQF recommendation defines a ‘qualification':

Box 2: The definition of qualifications

“A qualification means a formal outcome of an assessment and validation process which is obtained when a competent body determines that an individual has achieved learning outcomes to given standards”.

While traditional quality assurance systems tend to focus on the delivery of education and training – for example the quality of teaching and training processes and the overall ability of institutions to systematically improve these (through the ‘the quality circle’) – this definition draws attention to those elements and stage of the certification process determining trust. These are:

- The learning outcomes;
- The assessment and validation process;
- The standards;
- The competent body.

In the following sections we will address some of the quality assurance challenges following from the increased focus required by the shift to learning outcomes and the introduction of qualifications frameworks.

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2 The concept paper underpinning EQF (see Cedefop 2004) argues that a European ‘meta-framework’ should promote ‘Zones of mutual trust’ referring to common European reference levels defined through learning outcomes


4 In the five years since the adoption of EQF, twenty-nine European Union Member States, candidate countries and members of the European Economic Area have developed comprehensive national qualification frameworks.
It is important to underline – however – that this shift in focus should not result in reduced attention to the quality assurance of the education and training inputs. The message is rather that existing QA arrangements underestimate the importance of the certification process and that there is a need to balance the quality assurance of inputs and outcomes.

**Ensuring the quality of learning outcomes**

The use of learning outcomes – what a learner is expected to know, be able to do and understand at the end of a learning process – increasingly informs European education and training policies and practices. It is hoped that the shift to learning outcomes will increase transparency of qualifications, strengthen their accountability and promote active learning if used in the appropriate way. It is increasingly acknowledged that this depends on the way they are defined and applied; there's no 'one-size-fits-all' solution and learning outcomes must be carefully defined and described to be fit for purpose.

Quality assurance arrangements must critically monitor and systematically improve the way learning outcomes are used. It will for example be increasingly important to focus on the level of detail, the balance between generic and specific skills or competences and the extent to which these descriptors can be assessed or not. It is furthermore necessary to critically assess how these learning outcomes descriptions influence teaching and training as well as whether they narrow down or open up a learning process itself.

Systematic quality assurance of learning outcomes is thus critical at several levels: in relation to level descriptors of qualifications frameworks, the setting of qualification standards, the writing of curricula and agreement on assessment standards. Quality assurance of learning outcomes is for the moment given relatively low priority and its visibility needs to be strengthened at national and European level. As the shift to learning outcomes is becoming more and more of a reality, the link between quality assurance and qualification frameworks becomes more important.

**Quality assurance of assessment and validation process**

As qualification systems increasingly allow qualifications to be acquired through a variety of different learning pathways, for example, through non-formal and informal learning, assessment of learning outcomes becomes more important. While quality assurance so far has been focusing on education and training programmes and the input to these, the quality of these alternative pathways (for example work based learning) can only be assured by developing reliable and valid assessment forms able to decide whether the required/expected learning outcomes have been met or not.

The credibility of validation of non-formal learning (for example) depends fully on the quality of the assessment of the learning outcomes. The European Council addresses these issues in its recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning adopted in December 2012 and invites member states to put in place validation arrangements for non-formal and informal learning and to link them to national qualifications frameworks and quality assurance arrangements. The attention to the assessment process – and how this has to reflect learning outcomes based standards – is well reflected in the quality assurance arrangements for validation introduced in recent years across Europe (for example France, the Netherlands, Sweden).

**Awarding of qualifications by a competent body**

Traditionally, a competent awarding body can be an educational institution e.g. a university or a public authority such as the ministry of education. But we increasingly see that private companies, sector organisations, multinationals and international organisations award qualifications. To avoid the risk of 'fake qualifications' threatening the credibility of qualifications, quality assurance arrangements have to face this new situation and go beyond the traditional stakeholders in the public sector.

This challenge is reflected in the on-going efforts of some member states to open up their national qualifications to qualifications – and thus awarding bodies – in the non-formal and

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5 Cedefop/DG EAC survey accompanying PLA on ‘opening up NQFs’, Sweden 28/2/2013.
private sector. Countries like the Netherlands and Sweden have already developed quality criteria and procedures that will allow them to include qualifications awarded outside the formal education and training sector within their national framework.

To open its national qualifications framework, the Netherlands established strict quality criteria. For a private company to have its qualification included in the national qualifications frameworks, it needs first to be accredited for a duration of five years; it must indicate the qualifications framework level it sees as most appropriate, the company must define the learning outcomes in accordance with the main elements of the Dutch qualification framework level descriptors, specify the workload, define the assessment approaches applied, and provide a link to the relevant occupational profile.

Approximately half of the countries currently implementing NQFs indicate that they seek to open up towards private and non-formal organisations and bodies in the coming period.

**Quality of learning outcomes to given standards**

Examples taken from the referencing reports show that countries are increasingly using learning outcomes to describe standards as a key instrument for governing their education and training systems. Quality assurance arrangements must address how these standards are defined and described but in particular look at the feed-back loop involved in refining and renewing them. This feed-back loop depends on cooperation between labour market and education and training stakeholders (as is the case in Austria, Finland, Germany and Sweden) and helps to ensure the appropriate standards and therefore the relevance and credibility of the qualifications which are based on them.

**Future challenges**

The rapid development of learning outcomes based frameworks illustrates the priority given to increased transparency and comparability of qualifications – between countries as well as between education and training institutions and sub-systems. Achieving this objective requires a systematic interaction of qualification frameworks and quality assurance mechanisms that will guarantee the trust in qualifications. This interaction must increasingly focus on the certification processes and systematically seek to ensure the quality of learning outcomes, of assessment, of awarding/competent authorities and standards.

Traditional quality assurance mechanisms addressing the quality of teaching and learning looking mostly at institutions and programmes are equally important but they need to be combined with a stronger focus on the certification process and the shift to learning outcomes.

Such a shift will require that a broad range of education and training stakeholders (across general, vocational and higher education) and qualification providers (in the public as well as the private domain) work closely together. The Irish decision to establish one single quality assurance body exemplifies how a quality assurance not only has to reflect all levels and types of qualifications but also will have to systematically address how the certification process generates trust and credibility.

The link between quality assurance and qualification frameworks could be strengthened by further developing the common quality principles outlined in the EQF recommendation in a dialogue with all actors involved. This dialogue could address the challenges implied in taking forward quality assurance according to the four main elements in the definition of qualification discussed in this briefing note.

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**Mile Dželalija, University of Split, Croatia**

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1 Introduction and overview

The discussion paper on Quality Assurance in Qualifications Frameworks by Jim Murray is a relevant and excellent document, presenting the relationship and interactions between the

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6 Cedefop/DG EAC survey accompanying PLA on ‘opening up NQFs’, Sweden 28/2/2013.

7 Bringing together the responsibilities of the Further Education and Training Awards Council, the Higher Education and Training Awards Council, the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and the Irish Universities Quality Board.
two principal instruments – quality assurance systems (QA) and qualifications frameworks (QF).

The discussion paper gives all relevant information, proposing the base for further steps in the implementation of qualifications frameworks particularly in EU countries. With the opportunity for further discussion during the Conference in Dublin, the paper has a great potential to be useful for policy makers and all institutions responsible for quality assurance (internal and external) and the implementation of qualifications frameworks at national, EU, and global levels.

- The last three themes in the discussion paper are not the focus of this response, but they are connected to the improvement of education and training systems – and not only formal education, but also non-formal education.

In general, the quality assurance process should ensure that:

- Learners are protected from incompetent providers of education, training and assessment institutions and
- Employers and the public are protected from individuals who may be certified as competent yet do not have required knowledge, skills and competence to undertake the jobs they are to undertake.

Quality assurance is the process of ensuring that teaching and training, assessment of knowledge, skills and competence, and certification of qualifications enable the achievement of excellence as required by a set of standards. This implies the integration of theoretical knowledge, practical training and application in real life work environments. Quality Assurance becomes the main part of any qualifications framework, which, in general, includes:

- Development and implementation of the qualifications framework itself;
- Fitness (of learning outcomes) to cope with labour market needs, and other purpose of qualifications (individual or societal needs);
- Learning, education and training processes;
- Assessment of knowledge, skills and competence achieved and
- Certification of qualifications.

The standards of qualifications ensure the transparency of the relevant qualifications, which denotes the visibility and clarity of the qualification content as a baseline for the quality of qualifications. Occupational
standards, describing necessary knowledge, skills and competence for a specific occupation, are tools for improvement of labour market relevance of qualifications. Implicitly, well designed occupational standards (defining not only profile of required learning outcomes, and qualifications, but also their levels of complexity) can influence education and training – and not only formal or public providers – but also non-formal providers.

In addition, regarding quality assurance and qualifications frameworks in facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning (Theme 3), all key elements are well addressed in the Discussion paper. It is clear that the added values of NQFs in implementing the EQF will address contemporary issues in implementing the validation of non-formal and informal learning. An increasing number of countries are emphasising the importance of making visible and valuing learning that takes place outside formal education and training institutions (for example in leisure time, at home or at work). Non-formal and informal learning very often have outcomes that consist of specific values, which are completely independent of those of formal learning, such as high adaptability to the labour market and individual needs, even if they are not formally recognised. The main issues that arise within the development of national systems for validation of non-formal and informal learning are the reliability and the value of the validation process for non-formal and informal learning compared to formal learning. There are theoretical analyses for the principle of equal value applied to the validation of non-formal and informal learning and to formal education, based on quality of assessment of learning outcomes, and clear standards. But, still, some knowledge, skills and competence must follow from only formal education and training processes, including continuous and final assessments.

2 Theme 1: Integrating Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks to improve education and training systems

In the discussion paper it is very well explained that quality assurance and qualifications frameworks share significant common features and objectives. This provides a good basis for their deeper integration in support of education and training reform.

One of the above mentioned common features of QA and QF is a commitment to transparency and the building of mutual trust between national education and training systems. In that sense, the author presents the importance of cooperation between countries, and common criteria and procedures (particularly those in the EQF and QF-EHEA) for national qualifications frameworks, which clearly includes quality assurance systems (it even introduces common basic elements of QA in the EQF – for example, Common principles for quality assurance). Moreover, within the Theme 1, the Paper presents the importance of QF-EHEA self-certification and EQF reference processes, as a key interface between quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. The Paper further very well presents the importance of involvement of external quality assurance bodies in the self-certification and reference processes, and that NQFs become tools to guarantee quality of qualifications and act formally as gateways to registers of approved quality assured qualifications.

Additionally, learning outcomes are introduced as an essential element of both – quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. The Paper further stresses also the effect of the EHEA and ENQA on the VET system regarding quality assurance and learning outcomes implementation, in particular the quality of assessment of learning outcomes, leading to certification of qualifications.

As a conclusion of the Theme 1 in the Paper, the author presents different types of quality assurance bodies in different national education systems: from governmental ministries, through independent quality assurance bodies, bodies that set all standards, bodies that manage the development and implementation of NQFs, to national bodies that disburse public funds to providers, requiring compliance with quality criteria.

Questions in the section includes the roles of national quality assurance bodies in the implementation of NQFs, affect of NQFs on the balance between accountability and enhancement, then QA methods for promotion

8 http://www.leeds.ac.uk/educol/documents/194343.pdf

9 In the Discussion Paper the author uses “QF-EHEA verification”.
of NQF implementation, learning and working together of different sectors (HE and VET, and implicitly general education sector), including a question on close work to EQF and QF-EHEA coordinating bodies.

Additional questions for consideration and challenges:

• All relevant elements of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks have been presented in the discussion paper, stressing the clear relationship between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance. This is further strengthened when considering the role of learning outcomes. In addition, we could also present that there are new emerging national qualifications frameworks in some countries – creating quality assurance of assessment and certification as an integral part of those NQFs. In addition, by occupational standards in new NQF registers, the relevance of learning outcomes and qualifications become transparent for students, providers, and other stakeholders.

• Examples of qualifications frameworks use learning outcomes as building blocks for quality assurance standards of assessment. It means that learning outcomes (or better, Units of learning outcomes) are integral parts of quality assurance (of assessment and certification, and learning outcomes relevance for employability or any other needs of individuals and society). Reformed quality assurance systems become integral parts of qualifications frameworks. But, there is still an open question here – how to integrate another part of quality assurance (QA of education and training) and QF. An additional question is – how to reform existing quality assurance systems to be fully functional in implementation of such emerging qualifications frameworks.

• Instead of “QF-EHEA verification process” as a term in the Discussion paper, we may consider using “QF-EHEA self-certification process”. Otherwise “QF-EHEA verification process” could look like adifferent or additional process to the “QF-EHEA self-certification process”.

Isabelle Le Mouillour, Head of Basic Issues of Internationalisation / Monitoring of Vocational Education and Training Systems, BIBB, Germany

Are the reforms envisaged in Rethinking Education, particularly in relation to the provision of the right skills for employability, sufficiently embedded conceptually in existing European qualifications and quality assurance policy or are further concepts and structures required?

In the Report on Vocational Education and Training 2011\(^\text{10}\), the German Federal Government focused on two apparently contradictory phenomena. On the one hand, the considerable number of young people who do not immediately succeed in entering into training, and on the other hand companies’ increasing difficulties in filling the traineeships they are offering.

A responsible vocational training policy must fundamentally focus on both, on the interest of companies in training that will be of great benefit to them on the one hand, and on the individual, social and overall social interest in training that provides a broad range of skills ensuring employability on the other hand. Social exclusion and deterioration in the economy’s competitiveness due to skills deficits and a shortage of skilled staff must be avoided.

Young people should become aware at an early stage of their strengths, skills, career plans and opportunities in the world of work. Training markets are often regional markets. This means that local actors play a vital role in shaping the transition from school to work. For young people, the decisions on whether entry and integration into working life will succeed are taken locally.

What roles can national qualifications and quality assurance bodies have in coordinating engagement between labour market actors and education and training providers?\(^\text{11}\)

The dual VET system is underpinned by regulated coordination and cooperation mechanisms between the different stakeholders at Federal


and Länder levels, with clear but complex division of responsibilities. The core institution at national level for consensus building between all parties is the Federal Institute for Vocational Education and Training (BIBB). Its role is among others to ensure the coordinated involvement of VET stakeholders, among which labour market actors and education and training providers. The list of competent bodies is extensive, including mainly the chambers (of industry and commerce, crafts, agriculture, doctors, lawyers) but also by competent bodies in the public service or for the purview of the churches. Employers and trade unions are embedded in any changes to the VET system since those must meet the demands of industry and service. In the practice of vocational training, all cooperation is based on consensus; no regulations concerning initial or further vocational training may be issued against the declared will of either of the two social partners. Thus, initiatives for vocational educational reforms either stem from the social partners or have to meet with their acceptance. The platform for this process provides the Federal Institute for vocational education and training (BIBB) that also is coordinating and moderating it.

One can consider the whole as a multi-level multi-task regulated arrangement since for instance:

- The representatives of the stakeholders meet as members of the four-party main board of the BIBB and advise the Federal Government on fundamental issues of in-company training.
- For any change to qualifications requirements, the Federal Government, Länder representatives, industry and trade unions agree on basic principles. The work on the training regulations and framework curricula (for the school-based part) will then be coordinated by individual partners involved.
- Social partners agree on details of vocational training, such as the amount of allowance paid to trainees in the frame of free collective bargaining.
- As a rule, the initiative for updating the content or structure of a training occupation or for developing an entirely new occupation comes from industry associations, from the top-level employers’ organisations, from trade unions or the BIBB. After hearing the views of all the parties concerned, the responsible federal ministry decides in consultation with the Länder governments whether to proceed, since they are responsible for the regulations and curricula of the part-time vocational schools. In many cases, BIBB issues an advisory opinion or, particularly when larger scale revisions are being considered, conducts a research project before the ministry takes its decision.

Besides and transversal to the regulated activities, systematic research of the development of future skills needs is essential. It is not only a matter of evidence-based policy but also of evidence-based targeted development which links research with the activities of the stakeholders as described above. In that context, it is worth mentioning the “Alliance for Jobs, Training and Competitiveness” (1999), implemented within the subsequent initiative for the early identification of skills needs launched by the BMBF. It includes several research institutions, an education organisation, the BIBB, the German Confederation of Trade Unions and the German Employers’ Organisation for Vocational Training.

Data collection is complemented by BIBB monitoring activities. The new skills requirements are being monitored using different and complementary approaches: occupational and qualifications projections, surveys of companies, job advertisement analyses, surveys of advertisers, surveys of guidance staff, representative surveys of people in employment as well as regular surveys of continuing education providers.

How can the social partners contribute to the QA of education and training and the implementation of NQFs?

Given the characteristics of the German VET system and educational system at large the development and implementation of NQF is deemed to include social partners. The contribution of all stakeholders is part of the quality assurance within the VET system. The development of the German QF is a good

12 Bündnis für Arbeit, Ausbildung und Wettbewerbsfähigkeit
example on how stakeholders cooperate to promote the labour market relevance of qualifications in two respects: the process of developing the QF and the definition of the learning outcomes.


Following the principles of involvement of all relevant stakeholders the development of DQR started with a capacity-building phase. Besides agreeing to work on the development of QF, a major issue has been to identify the relevant stakeholders and mandate single experts and representatives of the institutions concerned.

Phase 1 of DQR activities (March 2007 to February 2009) combined the setting up of the working groups and the definition of shared understanding on objectives and key concepts. The BMBF and the KMK embraced the EU Recommendation by establishing a joint “Federal Government–Federal State Coordination Group for the German Qualifications Framework” (B–L–KG DQR), which was commissioned with the task of managing the process of drawing up a DQR. This process involves a large number of stakeholders from general education, higher education and vocational training, the social partners and other experts from research and practice. Together with the B–L–KG DQR, these stakeholders make up the “German Qualifications Framework Working Group” (AK DQR). Feedback on results was sent to delegates’ home institutions and committees on a regular basis.

Social partners have also been involved in the testing of preliminary results. What is considered as phase 2 (until September 2010) included sector representatives in specific working groups, along the further activities of the B–L–KG. Their mandate has been to test and achieve clear and consensual alignments of sample selected qualifications, to investigate the practical usefulness of the DQR matrix and to develop it further. Four occupational fields and areas of activity were selected (health, trade and commerce, IT and metal/electrical).

In terms of remits, all working groups included representatives from general education, ordinance issuers and the coordinating ministry from the company-based side of vocational education and training, the company-based side of VET, trade unions, vocational schools, providers of continuing vocational training and company-based training, institutes of higher education (universities and universities of applied sciences), academic research experts, youth social and welfare services, the B–L–KG DQR and the AK DQR.

Meanwhile the DQR has been agreed upon and the referencing report put to the EQF advisory group (November 2012). The work within the DQR working and coordination groups is going further, tackling for instance, the issue of level indication on newly issued qualifications, the validation of informal and non-formal learning outcomes as well as the issue of positioning general education qualifications.

The way the process is organised also supports the dissemination of the shared QF concepts into the different parts of the education and training system but also within the labour market activities. A major result is the definition of the learning outcomes bridging sectoral barriers. Like the EQF, the DQR matrix contains eight reference levels which describe learning outcomes (bundled into competences) independently of the qualifications. The DQR differs from the EQF by differentiating between two categories of competences. These are “Professional Competence”, subdivided into “Knowledge” and “Skills”, and “Personal Competence”, subdivided into “Social Competence” and “Autonomy”. The draft defines level 1 as an entry level (for qualifications from schools for pupils with learning difficulties and entry levels from vocational preparation schemes).13

Kevin Marshal, Head of Education, Microsoft Ireland

Our education systems are at an inflection point; the rapidly changing economic and social environment in which we live and, more importantly, in which our children will live and

13 http://www.deutscherqualifikationsrahmen.de/de/tt=/documentManager/sfdoc.file.supply&fileID=1339579330308
work, demands different skills and knowledge of productive citizens. Furthermore, a dominant feature of the emerging world our children will inhabit is the role and use of technology in the broadest sense of its meaning. Technology is, and will continue to be, omnipresent and ubiquitous. If the last five years is used as a benchmark we can only begin to imagine the extent that technology will impact on our lives over the next five years. In this context, the need to equip students, teachers and schools for a rapidly changing world driven by emerging technologies has led to an ambitious reform strategy across a number of countries.

Ireland is now embarking on a significant project to transform our education system, particularly at second-level. Initiatives, such as Project Maths, and recent plans to transform the Junior Certificate programme are to be welcomed and have been informed by best practice in the field of education transformation. In particular the plans to reform the Junior Certificate programme and to transform teaching and assessment strategies for the new programme have the potential to deliver fundamental change in Irish schools. The desire to move away from teacher-led teaching strategies and an over-reliance on summative high stakes examinations fit with best international practice and are to welcomed and supported.

In addition the proposal to introduce short courses at junior cycle level is also a welcome development. We have seen that countries, such as Singapore, South Korea and Finland, have already reduced the amount of curriculum content that schools are expected ‘to cover’ thus placing a greater emphasis on teaching and learning for understanding. Such a paradigm shift has been aptly labelled in Singapore as “teach less, learn more”. The evidence from international assessments, such as (Programme for International Student Assessment) PISA and (Third International Maths and Science Study) TIMMS, demonstrates that the countries that have shifted from a traditional transmission model of teaching to one that is more student-centred are now performing significantly better on these measures.

It appears that there is now political support to embark on transforming our education system in Ireland, as evidenced by the current Programme for Government and by recent announcements on the reform of the junior certificate. Yet the challenge for Irish society is to firstly consider what type of education system we want for our children and then to ensure it is implemented. However this conversation needs to involve all of society not just politicians, government agencies and departments, and teachers. It needs a strong input from industry, parents, young people, and others who have a stake in this discussion.

Underpinning all this ambitious reform is the need for a dynamic, vibrant quality assurance framework which ensures that all learning can be properly validated and assessed. This becomes more important in the light of ‘learning acquired through Massive Open-Online Course (MOOCs) and other digital open education resources’

There are a number of key points to address and consider:

- Can Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks keep abreast of and respond to this rapidly changing world?
- How can Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks deal in workplace learning and accreditations therefore within the context of a National Internship Programme for STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) students?
- What is the intersection of a Quality Assurance and Qualifications Framework system whether it be National or European and Industry Frameworks such as e-CF and ITCMF?
Thomas Mayr, UEAPME Representative on the EQF Advisory Group

Here are three general remarks, which at the end are summarised into a brief answer to the questions in the background document:

1. Most NQFs, even those that have already been referenced to the EQF are far from being complete. Therefore, the question of whether qualification frameworks and quality assurance contribute to the labour market relevance of qualifications, cannot yet be fully assessed. But there is indeed a great potential for the EQF/NQF development to bring the respective logics of the world of education and the world of work closer together: the learning outcomes approach and especially the way the EQF has been designed, challenges the traditional focus on institutions and especially on provider status. The EQF level descriptors at each level stipulate the equivalence between the study context and the work context. To varying degrees this principle has been transposed into the different NQF level descriptors. This is a chance for qualifications designed for the labour market to become more visible and thus to become more appealing, and it is also a chance to counterbalance the bias in many countries to focus more on general education than on VET. With reference to the EU 2020 goals and specifically the objective to reach 40% of the younger generation who should have a higher education qualification, this principle of “parity of esteem” between different types and profiles of qualifications will hopefully one day lead to a more balanced and more realistic view of what makes an individual highly qualified than is possible today, when statisticians and policy makers have to resort to “higher education” as measured by ISCED.

2. The learning outcomes approach indeed presents a certain paradigm shift, especially in relation to the chances it entails in terms of increased reliability of effective outcomes. For most of the knowledge and skills, well designed assessment procedures at the end of the learning period can lead to valid results. In the case of competence, such as the ability “to supervise the work of others” or “to manage complex technical or professional activities or projects” (see EQF descriptors) cannot be reliably assessed in a laboratory situation. Its achievement can only be monitored by graduates’ actual labour market entry and job performance. In order to avoid self-reference by closed education and training systems; employability indicators and statistics on labour market entry of graduates therefore must be important points of reference for quality assurance and for qualification frameworks. This is recognised by the EQARF (EQAVET) recommendation: Indicators 5 and 6 propose that information on “the destination of VET learners at a designated point in time after completion of training” and “the occupation obtained by individuals after completion of training” should be collected. If implemented properly, these two indicators alone could be an important contribution to the development of national VET systems.

3. Qualification frameworks and quality assurance go hand in hand. But it is a complicated relationship. In countries where the education and training system and the NQF are very close, if not identical, the issue seems to be more straightforward than in countries where NQFs are merely used to increase transparency and, eventually, overall consistency within the qualification landscape. Most member states seem to fall into the second category. In any case, quality assurance must act as a gatekeeper into the NQF. Given the need for mutual trust between Member States and, more generally, the necessity of trustworthiness of a specific NQF and the qualifications in it, this is a highly important task for which there must be clearly defined responsibilities and designated bodies. Securing labour market responsiveness and relevance however goes far beyond quality assurance in this narrow sense and, institutionally, requires much more than just one or several quality assurance agencies. To find the right approaches to foster responsiveness and relevance is very country specific and as such to a great degree outside European
qualifications and quality assurance policy and instruments. Having stressed the diversity of member states and of their respective policy responses, it is nevertheless tempting to identify at least two elements that are important in this context: one is to have in place governance structures and processes with checks and balances between a number of players including representatives from the world of work. This means that besides ministries and their agencies, it is necessary to involve Social Partners, other employer organisations and trade unions, chambers, professional bodies etc. in policy making and, if possible, also in education and training delivery. Even the most perfect labour market intelligence cannot substitute such governance structures, but can only provide the basis for negotiation and decision making at the right level. In some Member States, this highlights the need for institution and capacity development in order for organisations of the world of work to be ready to assume such a “co-ownership”. A second element is, where feasible and applicable, that such governance structures need to be combined with mechanisms of “built-in-responsiveness” as can be found in demand led systems, such as in apprenticeship training: if individual employers don’t see a mid-term need for skilled personnel in a certain area or profession, they just won’t recruit an apprentice in this field, even if the qualification was designed and quality assured in the most state-of-the-art way.

Summary of the comments above and answers to the three questions

The EQF/NQF process gives an important impetus to the national reform agendas. The learning outcomes approach especially, challenges traditional institution based views and opens the chance for labour market relevant qualifications and especially VET qualifications to gain visibility and consequently attractiveness. Qualification frameworks and quality assurance, thus can indeed contribute to improving education and training. But the main challenges to increase responsiveness and relevance are outside these instruments, and at Member State level. The key is to include stakeholders from the world of work in policy making and, if possible, training delivery, and to provide for demand led elements with built-in-responsiveness. For most countries, the maintenance and especially the development of such governance structures goes far beyond quality assurance bodies; i.e., it is not enough to give certain stakeholders a seat on the national qualification frameworks steering body or in a quality assurance agency. There needs to be a real sense of co-ownership by a variety of actors, including Social Partners, chambers etc. For some Member States this points towards the need for institution and capacity development for such organisations to be able to assume this role.

Kulli All, Estonian Ministry of Education

Thank you for the opportunity to share my thoughts. My response to the issue is based mainly on my experiences as a policy maker but also from experience as an adult educator. I agree with Dr Murray – that the question of whether quality assurance and qualification frameworks can improve the relevance of qualifications to the labour market, relies largely on the capacity of recognising different types of learning.

As it appears in the Recommendation on the establishment of the European Qualifications Framework for lifelong learning, the definition

**Theme 2 Questions – Using quality assurance to promote/improve the labour market relevance of qualifications**

- Are the reforms envisaged in Rethinking Education, particularly in relation to the provision of the right skills for employability, sufficiently embedded conceptually in existing European qualifications and quality assurance policy or are further concepts and structures required?

- What roles can national qualifications and quality assurance bodies in coordinating engagement between labour market actors and education and training providers?

- How can the social partners contribute to the QA of education and training and the implementation of NQFs?
of qualification means an outcome of an assessment and validation process. One should pay attention to the fact that qualification is an outcome of identification of the presence of LO. It means, that the way or the process of learning should not be important – whether it is formal, informal or non-formal learning. If the qualification exists, there have to be different pathways to recognise it.

In considering the issue of recognition of non-formal and informal qualifications, the question of validation can be addressed by approval of the qualification itself and the acknowledgment/approval of the awarding body. Ultimately it could mean a question of trust in the provider or “owner” of the qualification.

Common principles and quality guidelines, examples of good practice for validation of informal and non-formal learning have become available in recent years. Yet the field of non-formal and informal education is so diversified and fast developing, it’s difficult even for country-level certifying bodies to “embrace” the entire concept and therefore making it difficult also for European-level actors, such as EQF Advisory group or BFUG. These bodies are probably best suited to deal with the international qualifications to ensure a common approach to them.

The biggest barriers and risks of opening NQFs to the validation of non-formal and informal learning lies in the same source as the advantages of validation. The diversity of the area and the wide scope of providers makes it hard for national quality assuring insitutions to observe and assure the quality of providing these qualifications. The quality assurance and qualification bodies are historically linked by their area of expertise to formal education and the question of widening their activities is a question of limited resources and the optimal use of them.

The other challenge is to ensure the system is flexible enough to facilitate new skills, new qualifications, different types or kind of knowledge. Acknowledging that there is and always will be a tacit knowledge, especially from informal learning, which may not be possible to recognise, we should try to achieve a certain flexibility in procedures allowing these new skills recognition and inclusion in renewed formal qualifications.

It’s hard to say if the validation of non-formal and informal learning can promote transfer from VET to HE. If the RPL follows QA principles, there should be no obstacles, but again, it’s a matter of trust and transparency.

Patrick Werquin, Qualifications Policy Expert, France

This short paper aims at responding to the issues paper prepared to support the Dublin Conference – organised by Quality and Qualifications Ireland, on behalf of the Irish Presidency of the European Council, with the support of the European Commission – authored by Jim Murray. Overall, the issues paper addresses the main issues that come to mind when reflecting on the links between quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. However, in relation to facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning, the issues are not clearly addressed. This paper responds to the four questions asked and attempts to show why the focus adopted in the issues paper is somewhat too narrow.

The four questions proposed to facilitate discussion are mainly technical and do not touch on the key issue of the political/policy dimension. Although validation of non-formal and informal learning is at the top of the lifelong learning agenda in many countries – including outside the EU – there is little or no acceptance of what is achieved outside the formal education and training system, most of the time the initial one. The point is, there is a distinction to be made between validation and recognition, and societal recognition for that matter. Validation is merely a technical process by which an assessor, or a group of assessors, decides whether an applicant meets predefined standards. Recognition is about whether what is awarded to successful applicants has currency in society, particularly one key component of society: the labour market. When it is a qualification that is awarded, it is a key factor of employability (Theme 2). The issues paper mentions this aspect – when it says “same level of recognition and currency” – but this key point is not included in the four questions. It is central to the
conference because among the requirements for societal recognition is a thorough quality assured assessment process.

The subject is tricky because the issues paper appears to assume that validation of non-formal and informal learning may only lead to credit or qualifications, and this may not be the case. A second issue that is not addressed enough is the level of formalisation of the assessment process that leads to validation and ultimately to the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes (see Q2 below).

Questions and proposed responses

Q1. Could the European-level actors such as the EQF Advisory group, the BFUG working group, and European QA groups, identify, while making allowance for national specificities, the optimal approaches to documenting, identifying, assessing and certifying learning outcomes in validation? Or is this an unrealistic ambition?

R1. This seems a bit ambitious indeed! These bodies are responsible for encouraging countries to implement the principles provided in the Recommendations prepared by experts. It would be unrealistic to ask these bodies to also do the job of the experts. Their focus should be in helping countries join the European Qualifications Framework and ensuring high levels of quality assurance as necessary. This can be done, for example, by addressing the question of relevance and consistency of the European instruments and the local contexts, a dimension completely overlooked in recent years. There are many instances where countries – especially among recent accession countries – that have adopted European tools without sound reflection and policy analysis, without even a simple analysis of their needs. In the case of the European Qualifications Framework, there are ten criteria introduced by the Advisory Group for the referencing and these do not appear to be considered at the national level.

In the case of recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, nothing is clearly said except that the qualifications awarded should be included in the national qualifications frameworks. A user guide is a useful tool. However, it may not make too much sense if the overall idea of validating non-formal and informal learning outcomes is questioned in many countries, by many – if not all – actors and stakeholders.

The fact that the terms and concepts are still very unclear outside of a very small group of experts is certainly part of the problem. For example, the use of validation – instead of recognition – and of validation of non-formal and informal learning instead of validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is part of the problem. It would have been extremely useful, for example, to reach an agreement on the concept of learning outcome, and what it implies, for the European Qualifications Framework as well as for recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes. In short, countries do not – and cannot – have a sense of ownership.

One of the consequences of this lack of initial collaboration, communication and agreement is that the referencing and the national qualifications frameworks are way too heterogeneous to be used as a communication device. This may impact badly on achieving a high level of trust among EU countries.

Q2. What are the risks and barriers to opening up NQFs to validation of non-formal and informal learning?

R2. This question is at the core of the main issues described above. It touches upon the issue of the high level of resistance by many actors and stakeholders in Europe.

Firstly, there is the risk of the perception that recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes lowers the value and currency of qualifications achieved in the formal learning system. Secondly, the question of the different meanings of ‘learning outcomes’ in different countries is not addressed, and thirdly, the question of what the qualification process does is not addressed. There is an assumption that there is a shared understanding of what the qualification and the qualification processes are about.

Another risk is that all forms of learning that do not lead to a qualification are devalued. The issues paper rightly mentions qualifications, or credits leading to a qualification, as the main outputs of the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes process. These two
outputs are clearly essential to a country and the wellbeing of its labour market (Theme 2), and to its people and their employability. Nevertheless, there are other possible objectives for engaging in recognition of any kind of learning outcomes; and they also deserve attention, not in the short term and not for the labour market, but for the wellbeing of the people (self development, taking stock of acquired knowledge and competences, resuming studies, self esteem and confidence...).

This is important because it impacts on quality assurance and therefore on cost. When the validation of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is for self-development, it may not require a heavy quality assurance process. When the applicant aims at entering a regulated occupation, for example, the assessment process demands a thorough quality assurance process.

Finally, a potential risk is that qualifications in the qualifications framework are owned by people who are illiterate whereas even the lowest level in a qualifications framework requires a reasonable level of literacy.

Q3. Does validation of non-formal and informal learning transfer from VET to HE? Are there ways in which QA can promote such transfer?

R3. This question is somewhat surprising. The way in which it is phrased is problematic, it clearly shows that recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is only seen as a solution for the VET system. This cannot be the case.

In short:

- Yes, the outputs of a validation process could be used in the HE system even if the learning took place in the VET system. However, this is statistically irrelevant so far in Europe.

- More interesting is to realise that, in the HE system, quality assurance systems have been based on the format of the programmes and not on the content of these programmes. As long as HE is based on subject matters (fields, specialities), it seems difficult to see how learning outcomes — that are transversal by nature — can be considered as guaranteeing quality.

- The recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes is relevant even in the HE system. Many countries are successfully implementing approaches by which potential tertiary students undertake all or part of the courses and obtain credits exemptions (Canada, South Africa...).

- In countries where academic achievements are a prerequisite for accessing HE, recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes provide a way to facilitate access to HE.

As a matter of fact, the recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes approach is a convincing way for universities to fight against the demographic downturn and the progressive decline in numbers of traditional students coming from upper secondary education.

Q4. Are national or centralised public quality assurance and qualifications bodies too closely-linked to the formal education and training systems, and does this diminish their capacity to operate validation systems in a sufficiently flexible manner?

R4. This is a reasonable assumption to make, to say the least.

The development of systems, coherent systems — and not inconsistent sets of practices, for recognising non-formal and informal learning outcomes will demand that:

- It is accepted that vocational learning outcomes are as valuable as academic ones.

- It is accepted that people learn outside formal settings.

Neither of these two conditions are met in Europe, nor anywhere else in the world.

Rather, it seems that what matters is that learners evolve and become more competent (knowledge, skills, attributes) over time, regardless of where and how they learn. Qualifications measure this evolution. A modern system should consider all the above through the qualification lens rather than through an education and training lens.

14 It would not be validation that would transfer but the output of the validation process.
To begin, I want to thank Dr. Murray for his lucid, thought-provoking and well-written document. Although I've been asked to provide an expert intervention, which will necessitate some critical evaluation, I offer my comments in the deepest spirit of respect and collegiality. In North America, although our governance systems are different from those in the EC, we are struggling with the same fundamental issues. I found that studying Dr. Murray's paper helped to clarify relevant points for me, and I hope my response will also prove helpful to him and his organisation.

I was asked to address Theme 3 Quality Assurance and Qualifications Frameworks in facilitating the Validation of Non-formal and Informal learning. My response will come from my background as a practitioner and researcher in that area.

Validation for non-formal and informal learning?

I want to focus on the implicit assumption that the processes for validation of non-formal and informal learning (as defined by the European Commission, 2001, 32–33) can be equated for the purposes of validation and attendant approaches to QA and relation to QFs. As defined by the EU, non-formal learning and formal learning share many attributes such as process, purpose and content, while being primarily distinguished by the setting in which the learning takes place, that is outside the formal education system, and possibly with a less specified timeframe (Colley, Hodkinson & Malcom, 2003). These shared attributes make so-called non-formal learning much easier to validate with reference to a qualifications framework than is informal learning.

As Dr. Murray has pointed out, the proliferation of new private qualifications such as MOOC certificates or Mozilla Badges, in addition to well-known, established qualifications such as Microsoft certifications, makes validation of these qualifications an increasingly pressing issue. Approaches to how such learning should be evaluated are, however, already well-established in North America. For example, CREDIT, a service offered by the American Council on Education (http://www.acenet.edu/news-room/Pages/College-Credit-Recommendation-Service-%28CREDIT%29.aspx) has long evaluated such certifications in terms of credit-worthiness towards formal educational credentials, making recommendations accepted by higher education institutions in the USA and Canada. Very recently, CREDIT recommended acceptance of five Coursera MOOCs, so the process of linking this kind of non-formal learning to formal qualifications is already happening. If the curriculum and learning outcomes, instructor qualifications, assessment methods and so on of any private training are known, that particular training can be evaluated for all students who have completed it, rather than requiring each individual student to demonstrate the learning one at a time.

The validation of informal learning is a much more interesting, individualistic, and difficult endeavour. First, research on work-related informal learning has shown that not all informal learning is experiential. People use conscious tactics of self-directed learning and draw on many sources as needed to acquire new knowledge—internet searches, conferences, libraries, mass media and so on. Thus, even for individuals from the same organisation or occupation, their informal learning will be widely different — and wildly idiosyncratic. Attempting to get such learning to conform to standardised occupational qualifications can be difficult for the learners, for advisors assisting the learners, and for assessors.

Second, research has also shown much experiential informal learning is tacit rather than explicit. Much of what people learn in this way is embedded in what Canadian cognitive psychologist Endel Tulving has called episodic memory, relating to personal experiences. It requires conscious reflection to transform it into the type of de-contextualised, declarative and/or procedural knowledge valued in formal education and training. Such reflection could come through the development of a portfolio in which experiential learning is described against specified learning outcomes, a commonly used method for evaluating such learning. While such a process may require time, effort and resources on the part of the learner, experience at my own
university shows that this is nonetheless less than the effort required to acquire the same learning through formal means. The required resources to support this transformation process cannot, however, be ignored.

Finally, I want to highlight a danger in requiring informal learning to conform to pre-existing learning outcomes that reflect the expectations of formal training or education programs and/or the labour market. A validation process based on such expectations, particularly if focussed at the level of a course rather than a program, may not be able to recognise valuable learning that falls outside the boundaries of pre-defined learning outcomes. In these times of rapid and turbulent change, experienced-based learning may outstrip knowledge and skills encoded within formal qualification profiles. For example, in key STEM areas, game-changing knowledge is often created at a single, non-institutional site such as Apple Computers and diffuses rapidly through the labour force, while the situation may be different in more stable occupations such as baking or tourism management, individuals may nevertheless have acquired important learning that has yet to be recognised in formalised learning outcomes because of lag times in updating qualifications statements and education or training programs. Until the QF system is truly reflective of and quickly responsive to labour market needs, the validation process needs to be capable of validating valuable learning that has outstripped the formal system.

References
• to assess the results, provide comparisons between countries, sectors or institutions, and develop inquiries on specific themes or issues that are crucial to ensure progresses in practices.

2 What are the risks and barriers to opening up NQFs to validation of non-formal and informal learning?

I think that this question is not well formulated. Validation of non-formal and informal learning must become a normal way to get a qualification, as it is in some countries. This means that institutions awarding qualifications have to integrate validation as an element of their awarding system. And it’s because qualifications are positioned in a NQF, that validation is part of a Qualification Framework.

The danger, again from my point of view, would be to create specific qualifications for validation of non-formal or informal learning (some countries or sectors are tempted to do that), the risk would be in this case to create “second class” qualifications, with a lower value than “normal” qualifications.

3 Does validation of non-formal and informal learning transfer from VET to HE? Are there ways in which QA can promote such transfer?

Again I am not sure how well I understand the question. The process of validation starts from the individuals, of what they have learnt in different settings. What they have learnt informally is documented and assessed on the requirements of a qualification, their “informal” learning outcomes are compared to the learning outcomes that have to be demonstrated at the end of a “normal” educational process.

Validation is not a process of transfer; it’s a process of recognition. It is the responsibility of the individuals to choose (with some help or by themselves –that is the reason why a national Repertoire listing all qualifications with a description of the most important learning outcomes is crucial) the qualification which is the most adapted to their personal and professional pathway (as vectors of learning) and the more relevant to their project, to their individual progression or evolution.

4 Are national and centralised public and quality assurance and qualifications bodies too closely-linked to the formal education and training systems, and does this diminish their capacity to operate validation systems in a sufficiently flexible manner?

Effectively it could be a risk; quality assurance procedures introduce more formalisation. Validation obliges professionals involved in the process to be very flexible. Each candidate is different, even when doing the same job, has learnt differently, has taken advantage differently of his or her personal and professional situations.

However we need quality assurance procedures at least at two levels:

• at the individuals level to guarantee the quality of validation arrangements, because that’s their life, in a manner which is assessed. It’s not a paper at the end of an exam. Regarding this dimension of QA, what has been done with the Common principles and the Guidelines is essential and

• at the qualifications level to guarantee readability and transparency.

Qualifications frameworks are key tools for validation of non-formal and informal learning offering clear references, promoting a common perception of qualifications based on learning outcomes and mapping these qualifications in a country. The process started at European level leads to a QA process in itself:

• quality assurance for individuals: it helps with the development of coherent and continuous personal and professional pathways, offering a better readability of qualifications, helping individuals:
  - choose the best solution to make concrete their personal and professional projects on a lifelong basis;
  - identify conditions for access and participation;
  - contribute to continuity and progression, and movement from one sector to another;
- provide concrete references to identify and document what has been learnt outside formal systems.

- quality assurance for institutions offering an opportunity to rethink or revise their provision:
  - manage their provision, create new qualifications;
  - entering in a process of presentation of their qualifications on the basis of learning outcomes;
  - establish better links with the requirements of the labour market;
  - revise their assessment procedures and tools.

- quality assurance at national level, creating a tool for dialogue between sectors and with employers.

- quality assurance at European and international level facilitating mobility and interconnection of educational systems.

Eva Cheng, Qualifications Framework Secretariat, Hong Kong

The issues and recommendations arising from the experience with Qualifications Frameworks (QF) in the European Union (EU), as expressed in the keynote paper, are applicable to the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework (HKQF). In particular, the first two themes are challenges specifically faced by the HKQF, while the third theme is an emerging area of concern for stakeholders. In the following, I shall outline the similarities and differences between QFs in the EU and the HKQF, and hope to invite an EU perspective on the issues concerning the development and challenges facing the HKQF.

As Hong Kong (HK) has transitioned from a former British colony to a Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China (PRC), our education and training systems have shifted from a culture of British elitism to more an alignment with the system of the PRC. The HKQF was initiated in 2004, with a pilot phase lasting until 2009, following the enactment of two legislations passed on the formation of the QF body and the QA body with expanded remit on vocational qualifications. While the HKQF shares similar objectives with the EU QFs, there is less emphasis on “mobility across regions/countries”.

While integration between QA and QF is an objective shared by HKQF in an effort to improve education and training systems, the current progress in integration remains insufficient. More specifically, the importance of QF remains under-recognised in Hong Kong. Moreover, the QA approach in Hong Kong remains narrowly focused on accreditation of programmes, with a bias towards academic models. While the government does recommend moving towards a single QA body, the self-accrediting sector remains resistant. We hope to continue referring to the QAA, ENQA, EQAVET, AQF, SCQF and NFQI as we develop QA practices. We are particularly interested in the communication strategies employed in EU countries to illustrate the relationship and integration between QF and QA.

Regarding QF infrastructure, progress has been more rapid, including the use of level descriptors and credit, the award titles scheme, the development of industry competencies and standards, a robust QA mechanism, etc. However, progress with VET, despite remaining a priority, remains slow with considerable difficulties foreseeable. HKQF has successfully reinforced the outcomes-based approach of learning and outcomes-based approach of QA. Given that HKQF has been modelled on NVQ in the UK, we want to understand in more detail the adequacies and inadequacies of this approach before we chart the way forward.

Another concern is how HKQF can utilize the QA and QF to improve labour market relevance of qualifications. VET in Hong Kong is similar to the experiences portrayed in the paper, with providers taking on dual roles of mobilising the demand side and delivering on the supply side. However, VET in HK remains focused on industry competencies, with little attention towards entrepreneurial or transversal skills. Relevancy of qualifications and market need for such programmes are not QA criteria. Given that VET is always considered a secondary area of importance, and academic rigor remains more valued than relevancy in Chinese culture,
what are the suggested actions to help create a paradigm shift among parents and students?

Finally, the role of QA and QF in facilitating the validation of non-formal and informal learning is embodied in the RPL feature under the HKQF, but it remains unpopular with low public acceptability. Given support towards a general policy of recognition of prior learning, the HKQF has initiated a pilot validation process of NIFL. Concerns we have include: Does validation of NIFL lead to transfer from VET to HE? Are there better ways in which QA can facilitate such a transfer? Given HKQF's current stage of development, what is the importance and risk of embarking on this big project of non-formal and informal learning (NIFL)?

On the final issue of promoting confidence in Europe's qualifications on a global scale, an international expert has been engaged for a feasibility study of HKQF-EQF referencing, with the results being positive. Important questions for our future direction include whether a HKQF-EQF referencing project can proceed even though HK is not an EU member, and how HKQF can become more involved in QF/QA/ECTS/EQAVET activities in an EU context?

Hong Kong is a place where the East meets the West, and where European qualifications are well recognised. To further promote confidence in non-local qualifications on a global scale, we have launched a policy of "locally accredited non-local programmes". Successfully accredited non-local programmes are registered under HKQF, and learners enrolled on the programmes can apply for student financial aid. The Qualifications Framework Secretariat has also started another big project of studying the inclusion and alignment of professional qualifications into HKQF. The Irish experience is closely referenced in our study, and we also want to study other successful experiences from the EU member states.

Mohammed Slassi Sennou, General Confederation of Business, Morocco

How should Europe respond to the global developments in qualifications frameworks and quality assurance? Should it insist on a consistent approach or recognise the inevitability of diversity? Do you think that global levels are a good idea?

Referencing NQFs on a global scale to EQF requires a coherent approach which would include a prior set of verifiable criteria to confirm the credibility of the NQFs candidates in light of the mechanisms of mutual recognition sought. These criteria should be agreed by the NQF authorities who operate in different institutional environments that reflect specific values and cultures.

The challenge is to define the quality criteria sufficiently to ensure they are recognised and accepted by the parties. These prerequisites for recognition of the NQF credibility can be included in a model based for example on following criteria:

- Legitimacy, meaning the benefit of a strong legal foundation,
- Neutrality, meaning independent from private or public qualifications providers,
- Transparency and collegiality meaning on one hand, the existence of a process of positioning/referencing qualifications to the framework that involves the competent national authorities, social partners, civil society etc. while on the other hand ensuring there are transparent procedures communicated to all the stakeholders,
- Confirmation of credibility and responsibility by the use of rigorous procedures and the quality of the decision making.

However, we may question the relevance of a global approach. A framework for global referencing makes sense if it provides direct benefits for individuals, enterprises and institutions in terms of employability, mobility and competitiveness.

This would make the argument for a regional approach built by affinity or necessity with two possible methods i) developing Regional Qualification Framework by referencing the
country’s regional NQFs or ii) developing Regional Sectorial Qualifications Framework referencing the professional sectors. This highly pragmatic approach is the method being used by a Euro-Mediterranean Regional Project under the auspices of ETF, which is at the experimental stage. The project includes seven Euromed countries: Spain, Italy, France, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan and two sectors: tourism and construction.

The objective is to build what is referred to as “extended sectors” by analogy to the “extended enterprise”. By sharing their country’s strengths and anticipating the dynamics of the sectorial value chain, the “extended sectors” proceed to a smart co-localisation of occupations that produces sustainable regional competitiveness and individual mobility.

How relevant is the European experience in terms of supporting NQF developments in emergent democracies?

For the Kingdom of Morocco, the European experience is rich in learning and helped us to understand, during the design stage of the Moroccan NQF, what to do and especially what not to do.

The diversity of institutional contexts in different countries of the EU as well as the specific issues to be addressed in relation to qualifications allowed us a better understanding of our own situation.

First, the participative approach of all relevant stakeholders is crucial to the success of the project. The project of the framework development started in 2007. In 2011, the socio-economic partners were invited to join the National Steering Committee. In less than a year, the national qualifications grid was produced. Finally, the institutional form of the framework - currently under discussion between stakeholders - should be built on the European institutional model closest to ours.

It must be said that the implementation of the Framework is a commitment made by Morocco in the Advanced Status granted by the EU. Thus, Morocco has received support in the form of assistance and a high level of expertise under the umbrella of ETF.

Allan Brüün Pedersen, Agency for Universities and Internationalisation, Denmark

European qualifications have for centuries set standards in terms of quality, attractiveness and offered a secure gateway to the labour market. Individuals from across the world have travelled to European higher education institutions in order to obtain a degree which would enable them to settle in a prosperous European labour market or to return to their home countries with an attractive qualification paving the way for a successful career in their home countries. European universities and employers have been competing mainly with American institutions and employers in attracting the best qualified students and highly skilled labour, and to some extent with Australia and New Zealand.

The financial crisis in Europe and the emerging economies have altered this picture radically. The massive investments in the educational sector in the BRICS countries and other booming economies have spurred the development of top quality institutions and opened up a new much more attractive home labour market for the highly skilled academics and best skilled workers. Europe now needs to compete on another level.

There may not be any indications that the confidence in European qualifications has faded, but the growing self-esteem in other regions and countries have altered the picture of the obvious advantages of studying and working in a Europe, now in recession, while at the same time the respective home market is booming.

This has obviously been a key factor in the European response of building a more coherent European higher education area and to further
develop European cooperation within the vocational sector.

**Quality assured qualifications frameworks as cornerstones**

The general trust in European qualifications may not be endangered but when it comes to safeguarding the attractiveness of Europe as a study area and common labour market the true implementation of the EHEA and the cooperation within the vocational sector is vital. European qualifications must be built for the future and must be geared towards the demands of the labour market. Mobility within Europe must be smooth and recognition of qualifications must become obvious and unquestionable to secure Europe as a coherent study and labour market region.

The emergence of national qualifications frameworks and the overarching EHEA framework and the EQF may be potent answers to these challenges. For the first time the qualifications systems are now seen in conjunction, and higher education and the VET sectors are meeting at the same crossroads. The self-certification process and the referencing process allow us compare qualifications across Europe in a more transparent manner for the benefit of mobility and recognition.

So the question has been raised: has the emergence of overarching and national qualifications frameworks helped promote confidence in European qualifications on a global scale? This is probably a premature question and answers backed by empirical data or experiences are scarce, simply because the same questions have not been clearly answered within the European region itself.

Many countries have not finalised the designing and construction of their national qualifications frameworks yet, or have only recently finalised their frameworks but not the self-certification and referencing process.

Over the past years important discussions on the referencing of the various national degree types and qualifications have been what Americans call a ‘hot’ topic. We have seen heated debates on the referencing of access qualifications and debates on the referencing of qualifications at level 5 in the EQF. It has become clear that the construction of national qualifications frameworks and the self-certification and referencing processes have taken different forms in many countries. Some frameworks have been created to communicate and describe the existing qualifications systems. Other frameworks have been created to reform the national qualifications systems; to create better pathways among the VET and higher education sectors; to include private qualifications and to facilitate recognition of prior learning. In some countries recognition experts from ENIC-NARIC centres and Bologna experts have been involved, in other countries the frameworks and alignment processes have been a matter only for the national policy experts. This may have or will probably have the effect, that qualifications, which for many years have been seen as comparable, are referenced to different levels in the EQF. Agreements on access to higher education may be challenged and short cycle higher education qualifications may be assessed to have different learning outcomes across Europe.

Obviously this is a threat to mobility and might challenge recognition of qualifications which previously have been assessed as comparable. There is a need for a broad study of the referencing of qualifications to the EQF once all countries have completed the referencing process, in order to establish if previous European agreements and cooperation are challenged by different referencing of qualifications.

Quality assurance stands at the very core of these considerations. The quality assurance mechanisms of qualifications referenced to the national qualifications frameworks and subsequently through the self-certification and referencing processes EHEA and EQF frameworks must be consistent, transparent and build on the existing international standards and guidelines.

The quality mechanisms may take many forms from accreditation based on the ESGs, to recognition of programmes by ministerial authorities or by professional bodies. No matter what the system is, the principles and standards of quality assurance must be clearly communicated. Since VET qualifications and higher education qualifications are referenced
to the same levels in the EQF there is a vital need for mutual understanding of the quality assurance mechanisms between the different educational sectors if the pathways between higher education and VET are to be widened and for a more coherent European qualifications system to emerge.

Furthermore, some qualifications frameworks are open to qualifications outside the formal system while other frameworks, so far, are only open to formal qualifications. In light of cross border recognition and for the purpose of mobility within Europe this is also an issue which must be addressed in order to establish a broader European qualifications area. This is unthinkable without solid quality assurance mechanisms, obviously also underlined by the council recommendations on the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

The building of quality assured procedures and principles for RPL is an extensive task, but wherever it can be proven that the validation of informal and non-formal learning is undertaken under well-developed national systems and legislation these qualifications should be fully recognised. In the European Area of Recognition Manual it is recommended as good practice to recognise qualifications issued solely on the basis of RPL if the recognition has been done by an educational institution or another competent authority.

The considerations above are merely to emphasise that the European region is still at a beginning when it comes to the implementation, and the harvesting of the potential benefits of creating national and overarching qualifications frameworks. Therefore it can be argued that our frameworks have had little impact on promoting confidence of European qualifications at a global scale.

This does not mean that no progress has been made and that developments of aligning European frameworks with frameworks of other regions are not ensuing. The aligning of the Irish framework and the framework of New Zealand is a potent example of this. Furthermore, we in the European region must recall that in some countries the construction of a national qualifications framework and the implementation of a learning outcome based qualifications systems concluded many years ago. Australia, New Zealand and South Africa are among the front runners. Learning goes both ways.

Close cooperation with other regions and other frameworks is a necessity for building mutual trust. The alignment of national or regional frameworks with the European overarching framework is a possible step forwards in global cooperation. Quality assurance mechanisms for referencing qualifications to the various levels of a framework must be transparent and based on mutual agreements on principles and procedures. More pilot projects in line with the Irish and New Zealand experience are welcomed.

The ultimate aim might be a global framework with global levels and global descriptors. This is probably a vision not for the next generation but for generations in a more distant future. The diversity of countries, the different educational cultures at global level and most notably the fact that European countries are still in the process of constructing their own frameworks and concluding the referencing and self-certification processes, in addition to the fact that in many countries outside the European region national qualifications frameworks are not on the agenda, deems the construction of a global framework as a distant dream. From the European perspective we must conclude that we can only think of developments of a global scale, when countries within the European region have finalised their own processes, and when the possibilities and challenges of true implementation of the frameworks at a European level, and possible adjustments of our frameworks have been fine-tuned.

Possible supplementary questions:

- If the self-certification process and the referencing process don’t take previous European cooperation, most notably the construction of EHEA, and the previous agreements on comparable European qualifications into account will the overarching qualifications frameworks act as a translation device for qualifications or confuse issues?

- Are the overarching European qualifications frameworks tools for knitting the international cooperation within the EHEA and the Copenhagen Process closer
together creating a more coherent European qualifications area? And could that be a tool for securing and promoting the confidence in Europe’s qualifications on a global scale?

• Should more projects of aligning NQFs within Europe with NQFs outside the European region be initiated and by whom?

• How do we promote and build trust on a diverse quality assurance regime across higher education and the VET sector for the benefit of building trust in European qualifications outside Europe?
Chapter 3

Session 1: Conference opening and keynotes

Gordon Clark, Chair of the Board of QQI.

Good morning everybody. I am delighted to welcome you all to this conference on quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. This event is hosted by Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), on behalf of the Irish Department of Education and Skills as part of the Irish Presidency and with the support of the European Commission.

Today is an auspicious day for QQI because this conference marks the first public event that it has organised following its establishment only a few short months ago. QQI is, probably, a unique body internationally as it was created by the amalgamation of the four Irish bodies responsible for quality assurance and for the Irish National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ). It spans higher education, further education and vocational education and training. Therefore, it seems very appropriate that QQI is bringing you together in this conference as 150 participants, not only from across the globe but also as delegates and experts coming from the interrelated but often all too separate worlds of higher education, vocational education and training, quality assurance and qualifications, worlds that don’t normally have the opportunity to meet together and to discuss together at national or European levels.

We have come full cycle since the last Irish Presidency in 2004, during which a similarly ambitious and innovative conference was organised here in Dublin on common approaches across higher education and vocational education and training in Europe. So we now have this opportunity today and tomorrow, nine years on, to assess the progress made since the ambitious conclusions and aspirations of that event.

Today and tomorrow we want you to try to build new energy, to get to know each other, tease out new challenges, engage with new partners and build new coherence and energy.

At today’s first session we have three speakers. Our opening speaker is Seán Ó Foghlú. Seán is Secretary General of the Irish Department of Education and Skills. It is most fitting that Seán should open this conference, not only on behalf of the Irish Presidency but also because in a previous career he was the Chief Executive of the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and was instrumental in and lead the design, development and implementation of the Irish National Framework of Qualifications, while at the same time actively supporting the development of the European Qualifications Framework and the qualifications framework of the European Higher Education Area. I am delighted to introduce Seán Ó Foghlú.

Opening Address from the Presidency of the European Council

Seán Ó Foghlú, Secretary General, Department of Education and Skills, Ireland

Good morning everyone and welcome to Dublin. In particular I want to thank Quality and Qualifications Ireland for agreeing to host this conference on our behalf. We have just had the introduction from the Chair, Gordon Clark, of Quality and Qualifications Ireland.

We are so lucky that we’ve got Gordon to chair this new body (QQI) for us and to bring all of his international experience to bear now on the development of the Irish system, the deeper implementation of the qualifications framework and, indeed, of quality assurance arrangements and the link-in of Irish development into European developments, and I am sure that you are all, like me, delighted to see Gordon still
participating fully. It's great to have him here as chair.

I would also like to thank all of the staff of Quality and Qualifications Ireland for the organisation of this conference. In particular, Padraig Walsh, the CEO; Bryan Maguire, Andrina Wafer and all of the other people involved in the conference organisation. Of course, we couldn't do this without the support of the Commission and we are delighted to be joined by Deputy Director General for Education and Culture Xavier Prats Monné. We really appreciate the support of the Commission and this is, of course, a joint endeavour as a Presidency Conference. I am also delighted to be joined by Dr Jim Murray. Jim wrote the background paper for the conference and that is very helpful. He'll be leading off the conference.

One of the very interesting things about this area of work is the way people seem to 'switch hats' a lot but everybody still seems to stay involved to a certain extent. Certainly on the Irish side we have a lot of people switching hats. I don't think there's anybody involved with the same organisation they started with in this business but at the same time most of the people are still here and still involved and that's great to see. So the human capital is still there, the engagement is still there but everybody is changing roles, and I am sure that that's the same across the board in other countries but it's particularly the case with the Irish engagement.

This is a very important Presidency conference for us here in Ireland. It's one of four key Presidency Conferences. We've had one on rankings and visibility of quality outcomes in the European Higher Education Area in January. We've had one on integration, innovation and improvement of the professional identity of teacher education last month. Next week we have one on better assessment and evaluation to improve teaching and learning. This conference and the three of those are all mixed in with and are linked to the overall theme of the Irish Presidency which relates towards stability, jobs and growth. In particular the theme of this conference links in with education and training priorities for the Presidency and these include the provision of high quality education and training for all of Europe's citizens. This is essential if Europe is to tackle its unemployment crisis, strengthen its economic growth and create sustainable jobs. The Presidency is focusing on how access to education and training can be expanded to Europe's citizens and on ensuring its quality and relevance for European society and the 21st century labour market.

We are seeking to make progress on a number of issues which directly affect Europe's citizens. This includes working closely with the European Parliament and the European Commission. One of the priorities that has been identified by the Irish Government is the modernisation of the EU Directive on the mutual recognition of qualifications. It has been identified as one of the 12 levers to boost growth and strengthen confidence which were set out in the Single Market Act in 2011. So we're working on the modernisation of this Directive and this links in very much with the procedures for mutual recognition of qualifications, because they are underpinned by mutual trust, and this links in with the Qualifications Frameworks and quality assurance procedures.

One of the things, I think, for all of the Presidency Conferences, and very much for this one this morning is that it's not a one-off conference. It's embedded in the activities and processes underway. We feel that this is very important. We don't see much value (although it might be good fun) in holding a one-off conference. We really want to maintain the link in with the various processes, be they European Union processes or broader process such as the Bologna Process.

This conference, as Gordon has said, links back to the conference of nine years ago in relation to common themes and approaches to European policy development across higher education and vocational education and training. Back
then the key themes were enhancing quality and improving comparability. We’re very much going in the same direction but there have been a lot of developments since then. We also had an international conference three years ago on National Qualifications Frameworks and European Overarching Frameworks Supporting Lifelong Learning in European education and training, and those are all key linked themes which are progressing onwards and which the various quality and qualifications bodies have been leading on in Ireland on behalf of the State here.

We have had significant progress over the last nine years and I don’t want to underestimate the extent of this progress, in particular, with the development of National Frameworks of Qualifications, with the establishment of the Framework for Qualifications of the EHEA, with the European Framework of Qualifications and with quality assurance developments both nationally and internationally, and the establishment of ENQA and EQA-VET. From our point of view, we engage in an active and developmental way with each of these projects and we have been very involved in all of them. Different bodies have taken the different roles, and now with the establishment of the single body (QQI) we will add even more coherence and coordination to that. We have had many different people involved on behalf of Ireland in the development of the various aspects of those and many of them I know; although I wasn’t directly involved in the development of the Dublin Descriptors. Indeed here, in Dublin Castle, the Dublin Descriptors were drafted –led by Bryan Maguire on behalf of Ireland along with a range of other people. We were working in relation to the development of the Framework for Qualifications in the higher education area. One particular aspect of that - and it’s an area where we’ve really put a lot of focus since then - is on the verification of the compatibility in trying to come up with the procedures which should be put in place, which have now been tried and tested. Seeing the appropriate roles of qualifications descriptors and so on and the technical aspect of that and also the important underpinning nature of quality assurance and how quality assurance is implemented, and also the overall signoff on behalf of the State in a collective way. In all of those different developments, there are many people here who have been involved.

Likewise, in the initial steps in the EQF, which Gordon himself would have been involved with and on behalf of Ireland various people such as Jim Murray and Edwin Mernagh, would have been very involved in the developments of the initial thinking on that and in thinking about how the cross referencing can take place between national frameworks and the EQF.

We are all well advanced now with this verification of compatibility and referencing. I think the debate has certainly moved on over the years. I think it is very important to remember the extent to which all frameworks, be they national or international ones, are completely underpinned by quality assurance. In a sense their qualifications and qualifications frameworks are completely dependent on quality assurance, if there isn’t an underpinning set of quality assurance arrangements they wouldn’t really have much meaning, they are more theoretical than real.

This doesn’t mean at all that quality assurance needs to be standardised, whether in a national system or in an international system. One of the strengths we see in our system, even though we have moved to have a single body, is that we have a range of different quality assurance mechanisms in place. Of course we have the single body for further and higher education and training; but we have different quality assurance arrangements and different awarding arrangements in our schooling sector. There needs to be cooperation between the quality assurance agencies and we need to have an overall consistent national practice. I think the verification and referencing show this but they also show that there can be inconsistencies in the role of quality assurance bodies and that more common work is needed. It’s all about integration and I know that Jim will be talking a little bit more about that later on.

I think it’s also worth reflecting on why we have got so interested in the concept of qualifications frameworks. There are a number of real values that underpin qualifications frameworks; there are the obvious ones that we’re all aware of: learning outcomes, comparability of outcomes, facilitation of progression and transfer used by industry, standards and so on. They are all the
sort of obvious ones that everybody is attracted to, but I think the reason that the qualifications frameworks over the last ten years have really caught the eye of so many policy makers and, indeed, the implementers of policy, is their potential as a catalyst for other developments. In particular they can support whole system reform which is a vital element of change; it’s what’s envisaged, for example, in Rethinking Education. Whole system reform is about not just having individual bits of change but having an overall change process which impacts in every way across all of education and training.

That is why the conference aims today to explore how qualifications frameworks and quality assurance systems can be harnessed, how they can be made to work in tandem so that the overall goals of reforming our education and training systems can be realised, whether these are at national or international level.

The issues paper for the Conference is a very helpful paper indeed, I’m sure we have all read it and we’re going to be talking through it in a bit more detail. What I would like to do is maybe just give an Irish example for each of the themes just to show how relevant the themes are from both a national and international perspective.

The first theme is: “integrating quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to improve education and training systems”. We in Ireland, have used these developments to advance implementation of learning outcomes including in schools, which wasn’t something that we would have envisaged at the start; the extent to which the learning outcomes approach was well advanced, especially in higher education and to a certain extent in VET internationally. Our whole school reform programme, for example (we’re reforming the first three years of our post primary education at the moment) is based on the learning outcomes approach, and that’s very important, that the learning outcomes approach is being used for change. The other element, one of the key elements when we initially established the framework, is that we really wanted to push for transfer and progression. We really wanted to open up transfer and progression outside of the normal, typical progression routes and we have succeeded to a certain extent in doing that and the framework has assisted but that doesn’t mean that it is ever completely finished. I think a lot of further work will be needed on that.

The second theme is: “using quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to improve the labour market relevance of qualifications.” I think that this is another area which has been very helpful for us for the use of learning outcomes and the articulation of award specifications in terms of knowledge, skill and competence at all levels. That has certainly helped us really rethink to a certain extent what different aspects of education and training are about. It has really informed a debate, for example, on what is ‘graduate-ness’ in terms of higher education, and that’s just one aspect.

We have different systems of vocational education and training which we’re bringing together. I think the fact that we have those different systems and the fact that we had a framework really shone a light on the similarities and helped us move towards a policy decision to bring together our further education and training under a single department, as it is now, under the Department of Education of Skills but also with a new single funding stream and with our Education and Training Boards being established from our VECs and taking responsibility for the delivery of all further education and training or the outsourcing of it.

In relation to the “Validation of non-formal and informal learning”, that’s another theme for the Conference. Is one area where there has been a lot of work underway over the years. These developments, for example, in Ireland have allowed programmes to be developed that embed the validation of non-formal and informal learning for accelerated entry into programmes, particularly for cohorts of learners on a combined basis, where they share very similar experiences and backgrounds. That’s just one example of it; we’ve lots of different examples. Certainly, we fully accept that we haven’t systemised this yet. We need deeper implementation of all aspects of what I’m talking about but particularly in this area, but it is an area where we have advanced a lot over the last ten years with the help of quality assurance systems and frameworks.

The final theme is: “the promotion of confidence of Europe’s qualifications on a global scale.” I think I have some very good personal
examples of this from when I have been abroad representing Ireland. The way we use the Irish framework links into both the Bologna Framework and the EQF to communicate outside of the European Union what our qualifications mean. For example, we would have negotiated a qualifications recognition with China on that basis. Our Minister for Education, Ruairi Quinn, is actually out in China at the moment and that’s why he can’t be here this morning, and he would actually be using the NFQ diagram often to communicate about what the Irish system is to make it easily understood. It’s a great way of explaining and communicating, but it only is a great way of explaining and communicating, if it is underpinned in a real way by qualifications which are in turn underpinned by programmes, underpinned by quality assurance.

The other thing I wanted to say is, an important aspect of all of the different conferences that we have in Ireland to do with qualifications and quality assurance is that we try and move towards conference conclusions. That’s one of the ways we ensure that it’s not a one-off conference. Indeed, I was reflecting with Gordon on the conference nine years ago and how at the end of that Klaus van der Pas moved towards conclusions which were very helpful in moving along. We feel that that aspect is very important and I know Bryan will be leading on that today, trying to help us move to agreed conclusions so that it can inform the debate onwards. We may have a relatively big group in this room, but this has impacts for a number of different processes which are linked, and each of those different processes, the people involved in them need to know about this and need to know about the steps forward that we’re taking at every stage.

I just want to stop for a second and reflect on Irish developments generally, because we have been on a journey in Ireland with our NFQ and with our quality assurance system. We initially introduced the concept of quality assurance actually in our Universities legislation in 1997 and, indeed, as many of you will know, there had been a number of pilot projects underway throughout the 1990s. We initially introduced our NFQ concept in 1999 legislation, we had four bodies which were tasked with various responsibilities in further and higher education and training in terms of qualifications. One was the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland (NQAI). We had the Further Education and Training Awards council (FETAC), the Higher Education and Training Awards Council (HETAC) and the Irish Universities Quality Board (IUQB). For different reasons we needed different bodies and I think that was an appropriate decision at the time. But we are very pleased that we have moved on to have a single body now and that we have general agreement, This wasn’t contested. It might have been a contested area 15 years ago but it isn’t a contested area now. There’s general support from all of the stakeholders in moving towards that single body with responsibility. That’s not to say, and I’ll stress, that we’re taking away any responsibility from institutions and providers for their own quality assurance systems, and I think that’s very important, please don’t take any centralised control message from the arrangements that we have. At the same time we have an overall body to challenge the institutions and providers and to work on the NFQ and to encourage framework implementation. We are delighted, as I said, that Gordon has agreed to chair that and to bring his expertise to assist us in that regard.

I would also like to say that just because we have this institutional model we don’t see it as a model to be emulated in other countries. It is indicative of how seriously we take the necessity of integration as a means of achieving reform, access and employability. In no way do we see it as a necessary model, everybody has different systems, and I think we aren’t trying to encourage any organisational system onto anybody. We are very keen on the concepts around frameworks and quality assurance but we wouldn’t at all be trying to imply that our actual organisational arrangements are applicable elsewhere.

So, I want to conclude now and to welcome you all again to Dublin. We are really thrilled that everybody has come here again, we’re really thrilled to be engaging on these issues on a continuing basis and we look forward to a very engaging conference and a successful outcome. Thank you.

抱住你 very much, Sean. This conference takes place, of course, within the context of the EU’s Europe 2020 growth strategy with its
emphasis on the modernisation of education and training systems which is coordinated by the European Commission. Our next speaker, Xavier Prats Monné (one of my ex-colleagues from the Commission) is Deputy Director General for Education. Like Seán, he has very broad responsibilities, they range from the education and training aspects of Europe 2020 to skills and qualification strategies, to multilingualism (which is very appropriate in Xavier’s case) to the EU cooperation and mobility programme such as Erasmus and the European Institute for Innovation and Cooperation, to name but a few activities. So, who better to place our discussions in the broader perspective of reforming education and training systems than Xavier, whom I am now delighted to introduce.

Opening address from the European Commission

Xavier Prats Monné, Deputy Director-General for Education and Culture

Thank you, good morning, good morning everybody. This is a grand setting, it looks like a bar room at a gala dinner except that there’s no food, which shows how skilful the Irish presidency is at producing efficiency without expenditure.

Thank you very much. It’s not a coincidence, I am sure, that we are having this conference under the Irish Presidency. Ireland was the very first country which referred its national qualification levels to the EQF in 2009. That’s not just proof of the commitment of Ireland to European integration, but it’s also a sign that there were some Irish people around to make the EQF happen. Among those few people I can think of two. One is Seán Ó Foghlú of course, who was instrumental in introducing the EQF from the Irish perspective. The other, of course, was Gordon Clark, who was at the DG Education. Even today, I think more than two years since he left lots of people that I see in our corridors say, “When Gordon was here...” Usually this is somehow a veiled, or not-so veiled, criticism of what we are doing now compared to what we were doing when you were there. So, indeed, thanks a lot and my tribute to the Presidency for this.

International surveys and the not-so generous advice of my own colleagues tell me that when I speak it takes about three or four minutes for people to start consulting their emails. So before you do that, let me say a few words about what I’m going to speak about. I would like to mention three points.

I would like to say first that what we discuss today is really important, and it is really important not for bureaucracies like us, not for administrations, not for systems, but for people. Quality assurance and qualifications frameworks are about increasing transparency. They are about making sure that systems focus on learners, which is the point of education, on increasing transparency, on increasing recognition. So this is really very important for people. That’s my first point.

The second point is that important as this is for people, very few people outside this room would guess this by looking at the title of our conference today, because when you mention to somebody “quality assurance and qualification frameworks”, it’s pretty much the same as saying “quality frameworks and assurance quality”, or something similar. The point I am trying to make is that we have instruments that, considering that they are about transparency, are remarkably non-transparent and difficult to understand and we really should do something about this.

The third point I want to make is, I think, a much more important one. There is really very little confluence between the sense of urgency of our policy statements about education, about mobility, about learner outcomes and so on and the speed or progress in implementing them. So we really have a problem, we really have an issue. At the Commission we are really trying to make sure that we really insert a sense of urgency into progress on these issues that are so important and so complex. We need to make them simpler, we need to make them easier to understand, and we need to make them more useful for citizens. We will not achieve that unless we do it with Member States. So let me put it a bit bluntly;
this conference for us is a beginning and a test. A test of the willingness of Member States and other stakeholders to actually engage seriously in a very thorough, in a really meaningful effort to improve our tools for recognition and transparency and mobility.

Now let me try to develop this a little bit perhaps with a few words about context. You know we have the Europe 2020 strategy, don’t worry I will not give you the month of the strategy, but let me just underline that the strategy does have one big merit, and this is that among the enormous Christmas tree of possible priorities for the EU, it selects just very few priorities as critically important for Europe’s sustainable growth and productivity. One of them, as you know very well, is education.

From that starting point our task is to make sure that we develop what that actually means. For example, what it means to preserve and ensure growth-friendly investments in education, and to make sure that we match our policy priorities with our spending priorities. We then ensure added value of programmes, especially now that we have this window of opportunity where we are about to set in stone the funding programmes and the modalities for funding education, for funding mobility for the next seven years.

Now, within that effort of developing the meaning of this emphasis on education we tried to produce a number of policy initiatives and the one I wanted to mention is ‘Rethinking Education’. Rethinking Education was produced in November last year and among its proposals, it tries to give an overview of precisely why and how we have to rethink education systems to make them perform. One of the things we propose in the communication is the creation of a European Area of Skills and Qualifications, which is the response to the sense of urgency I was mentioning at the beginning. I won’t go into details, the architect of that communication is actually here with us, and Ana Carla Pereira (who is the head of Unit for Skills) will close the conference and she will give you a much more interesting view of what we are proposing than I could ever possibly do.

So let me tell you now from the start what I was saying about the importance of the issue today, how it is not working as it should and what should be the next step to improve it. The importance of discussing transparency and recognition for skills and qualifications - I don’t need to tell you much - we have now in Europe 25 million people who are unemployed, five million youth unemployed. In my own country, Spain, we have over 55% youth unemployment, which means that more than half of all young people who are seeking a job, can’t find one.

We have an enormous number of people who are without a job, not in training or in employment, and therefore are likely to find it difficult to re-join the labour market. Besides this we have at the same time more than two million vacancies in the EU labour market. So we have not just a problem of very serious unemployment and youth unemployment, we also have a problem of skills mismatches.

The forecasts for the future; and Lord knows that we have to be careful with forecasts; include overwhelming evidence that no matter where our economies go, they are going to be knowledge economies and knowledge societies. Therefore there will be a requirement for highly skilled people. In other words, skills will continue to pay, even if we have in many countries, like my own, a growing number of people who are underemployed so who are doing jobs below their skills level, skills will continue to pay. The demand for high skills will certainly increase.

We also have, of course, demographic aging which everybody talks about. It is not just a scenario, it’s actually already happening. We have countries like Germany where last year the population actually started to decline. In Germany, within the teacher population, you have more than half of the teachers in primary and secondary education who are over fifty years old and less than 3% who are under thirty. So we have to make sure that learning is not just something for the young but something for an increasing percentage, an increasing range of our population demographic.

And then lastly, don’t forget that we are not alone in the world, look at the extraordinary change in the distribution of talent. One in three, actually 35%, so more than one in three young people who joined university this year come from China. One in three of the people who already have a university degree and are over 55 years old, people like me for example, one in three come from one country, and that’s the USA.
So that gives you an idea how there will be an increased need for high skills, a problem with skills matching, a demographic challenge and a global competition for talent. This means that we really should do something about skills and qualifications. The questions we need to ask ourselves are as simple as: are we enabling students and other learners to get the relevant skills they need for work and for higher productivity? Are our tools for transparency and recognition as we have them now, allowing for us to move transitions between school and work or between different learning pathways? Do we provide the right framework conditions to allow our citizens today to choose what they want to learn, where they want to learn and when they want to learn it? This is what citizens are asking for. Are citizens capable of moving across the EU and having their past learning or work experience recognised without difficulty? The people who are not here today, as I was saying, the learners, the students, the non-specialists, are they capable of understanding how our instruments complement each other? And lastly, is the concept of learning outcomes which we see so clearly confined to jargon of policy makers like us, or is it understandable for citizens?

Well, I am sure you will agree with me that the answer to most of these questions are not really entirely satisfactory. Today it is still not possible for a qualified primary school teacher from Austria to teach and work in a primary school in Germany without passing additional exams. A Finish laureate with a BA in Management and French cannot automatically aspire and enrol in a specialised Masters course in accounting in France, for example.

So despite the important number of tools that we have developed at European level, be it qualification frameworks, be it the credit systems or quality assurance arrangements, we have to face the fact that we still cannot reap the full benefit of mobility for further learning for employment and for productivity. This is a fact and it is extremely important that we remember this, because this is what we should focus on if we all agree on the urgency and importance of delivering better outcomes for learning from our educational systems.

So let me come now to the issue today: qualifications frameworks. Well national qualifications frameworks give us a wealth of information about the skill potentials of our countries. They also allow us to plan better, within the limitations of the exercise, for the kinds of skills and qualifications our education and training systems should provide. Indeed, the European Qualifications Framework acts as a translation device and it allows individuals and employers to better understand and compare the qualification levels of different countries and different education and training systems.

We now have this qualifications framework and national qualifications frameworks, as you know, are being developed and implemented in 47 countries. In about 40 countries’ frameworks, all levels and types of qualifications are covered while in the rest of the countries they cover higher education qualifications only. Of the 35 countries involved in the EQF process: almost half, 15, have referenced the qualifications to the EQF and six countries are indicating EQF levels on certificates, diplomas and European documents. This is fewer than initially thought; we are not going as fast as we would like, but most countries are proceeding in a very thorough manner involving all relevant stakeholders and international experts, so we are making progress here.

The reality is, however, that qualifications are not always understood and trusted in other countries, whether European or beyond, or for that matter, between different actors and different education and training sectors. Even within countries there remain challenges such as moving from VET to higher education qualifications only. Of the 35 countries involved in the EQF process: almost half, 15, have referenced the qualifications to the EQF and six countries are indicating EQF levels on certificates, diplomas and European documents. This is fewer than initially thought; we are not going as fast as we would like, but most countries are proceeding in a very thorough manner involving all relevant stakeholders and international experts, so we are making progress here.

So, traditional quality assurance systems focus on the delivery of education and training. Yet quality assurance must also be directly related to the qualifications themselves, such as the standard applied, and to the processes through which they are obtained, such as assessment methods.

So this is where we stand. Perhaps one example, to illustrate in practice where we stand, taken from higher education–Bologna countries have a network of quality assurance agencies, as you know, with a range of cooperation instruments based on the European Standard
and Guidelines. There is a quality assurance register that has been created which is a register of quality assurance agencies that recognise each other’s assessments. The register is an instrument that promotes trust and encourages countries to allow foreign quality assurance agencies to assess the quality of their national institutions. Even if this process of opening up is slower than we had hoped, it will allow higher education institutions to simplify accreditation or evaluation procedures, for instance, when proposing a joint international degree facilitating mobility and exchange of experiences.

So the register is certainly beneficial. Is it setting standards? No, for the moment our system is rather geared towards supporting compliance. That is the meeting of standards, instead of promoting excellence and the setting of more ambitious standards. Our systems should promote and favour diversity, and we need to give a space for innovative approaches. For example, how can our quality assurance systems cater to the exponential growth of massively open online courses? Everybody talks about MOOCs, they are certainly over-hyped. A MOOC, at the end of the day, is just somebody in front of a television. They will, however, force exceptional changes in the way higher education institutions organise work in their business models. So certainly we should make sure that our systems acknowledge these changes. How, for example, can we ensure that joint degrees, which are the product of cooperation between European universities and institutions; something that we have proposed in the past and we will support much more in the future in the new programme Erasmus for All; how can we ensure that joint degrees are considered by our quality assurance systems? We run the risk that if we are not faster in promoting and implementing our systems that by the time we complete them reality will have gone past and beyond. So, this is an example of where we stand and the need to make progress.

I mentioned at the beginning that we had this communication from November last year on Rethinking Education. We tried to identify in that text the different challenges facing education and training and of aligning more closely what is taught through the needs of the labour market and of modernising in the context of fiscal constraints. Rethinking Education identifies the need to enhance transparency and recognition of skills and qualifications as one of the most urgent challenges. We have tried to insert a sense of urgency in this challenge. Many tools created in the last decade for similar purposes have been diverging in their implementation. In different education and training sectors a lack of communication and coordination between different parties has contributed to this. Due to this fragmentation of tools, the divergence of approaches and the lack of involvement with other stakeholders, for example, from the labour market, education and training tools for transparency of qualifications and mobility impacted on other policies. It is not uncommon, we all see it, and certainly I see it in my work, to meet policy makers dealing with employment policies who simply do not know what a qualifications framework is. Yet qualifications are passports to enter and move in the labour market and we certainly shouldn't allow our administrations, including within the Commission, but certainly also at national level, to become organised as vertical silos. That would be an obstacle in progress on qualifications and frameworks.

Actually, we know that the recognition of qualifications is still surrounded by uncertainty and lack of clarity. In many cases recognition remains at the discretion of education and training institutions and often they do not fulfil the obligation to communicate the reasons for their non-recognition decisions.

We still lack straightforward information on mobility. Over the years we have created several networks and websites to reach the citizens and yet we do not have a single access point where students or workers who are concerned by bureaucratic procedures are able to discover what their qualifications are worth in the European market, where they could reach further training opportunities, how they can present their CV to a future employer or what to do to have their qualifications recognised abroad.

Our task, as we see it in the Commission, should be to simplify the existing sources and make them converge so that individuals can move from schools to work more easily, or the other way around. This would enable students to tailor their learning path according to their needs.
and expectations across education sectors. Education policies become a focal point for employability, productivity and innovation. Of course education is not just about productivity, employability and innovation, but somebody who is very educated and cannot use his or her education in their daily life, is not really a winning proposition.

Europe needs to value and recognise all learning activities undertaken throughout life, including the entire spectrum of formal, non-formal and informal learning. Ensuring that individuals, young or old, are capable of upgrading their skills and demonstrating them in an effective way is important for their active involvement in society. It is also necessary in order to facilitate the matching between education and labour market needs and to combat unemployment, which is a critical issue for our societies. These are the aims of the European Area for Skills and Qualifications that we are proposing in Rethinking Education.

I am aware that we are just starting and actually I am aware that today I have raised more questions than I have answered and maybe you have found my comments overly critical. But I think that we have an obligation; although it is easier to look at what we have achieved in the past; to see and look towards the future and translate the urgency that, with political leaders, we ourselves emphasise for the importance of education, for the importance of learning outcomes. We must translate this into reality through our instruments.

We will explore these issues in depth in the upcoming months after the summer; we will produce an open public debate which will feed into an input assessment towards a European Area of Skills and Qualifications. We are determined to achieve that. However, first of all we will continue, of course, with the current evaluations of the EQF, on Europass, on EQAVET, on quality assurance in higher education or ECVET and use events like today to change ideas. This can give us a more detailed picture of what is currently happening across countries and point us towards future solutions, but let me be clear about our aim: our aim is not to create new instruments, our aim is to reinforce the synergies and the convergence between the instruments we have for transparency and recognition; to engage with policy makers, with national authorities, with social partners and others to see how best we can achieve this.

The result of our input assessment should allow us to present you with the elements of a European Area for Skills and Qualifications that we plan for some time in early 2015. For this, as I said at the very beginning, we will need the help of Member States, we will need the help of education and employment stakeholders because the Commission cannot do it alone. We hope that Member States and others will join the Commission in making sure that we have instruments for quality assurance, instruments for recognition of qualifications that are not just there to satisfy administrations, but actually they are there to help citizens in the very difficult task of acquiring the education and the skills they need to be productive, active and positive citizens in our societies. Thank you very much.

Gordon Clark

Thank you, Xavier.

Our third speaker in this first session is Jim Murray, who is Director of Academic Affairs at Institutes of Technology Ireland, which is the representative body of Ireland’s 13 Institutes of Technology. Jim's expertise and experience in the National Qualifications Authority of Ireland and in European and international cooperation and qualification frameworks and quality assurance make him an ideal person to reflect on and identify the key issues for consideration by this Conference. So we are very grateful to Jim for having taken this task on and for having prepared the keynote paper.
Thank you, Gordon. Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. It’s very nice to see such familiar faces both from the Irish context, and also from the European context, particularly the members of the EQF Advisory Group.

I suppose the first thing I want to say before beginning the presentation is that as far as I am aware no volcanoes have erupted yet this morning, so we can hopefully relax a little bit and not be worried about flights home, which was one of the key themes of our last Qualifications Quality Assurance Conference.

I would like to make a few preliminary remarks. This presentation and the paper on which it is based is very much at the service of the conference and it’s designed to actually stimulate discussion across the four themes. I am not going to do anything particularly sophisticated, I’m just going to work through the four themes, because it is very much a working document to help with the discussions today.

I suppose the first thing I wanted to say is that the paper is addressed absolutely to policy makers and it assumes a number of things which are not written in the paper. First of all, it assumes that there is a diversity of institutional arrangements at the national level, but it will ask some questions around that. It also assumes the absolute necessity of having an inclusive approach to stakeholders. These are just taken as read and I can say that absolutely passionately now as I am one of the stakeholders of quality assurance. I work with a group of providers that have to work within those systems and absolutely it is important that stakeholders are included within those processes.

The paper is addressed to policy makers and what it’s really concerned about is the whole issue of transitioning from policy and strategy into implementation. And we are making progress, steadily if not spectacularly quickly, but we are gradually moving into a phase of the implementation of frameworks post EQF referencing and post Bologna Framework self-certification. So we are talking about implementation in the next phase.

Another issue that I want to consider is the whole issue of following the logic of existing reforms to their conclusion. Particularly in the context of the relationship between quality assurance systems and qualifications frameworks, and the labour market, this is a key relationship. As the Director General has indicated, it’s very much now at the heart of the debate on education and training in Europe and particularly the role of the quality assurance and qualifications framework tools.

I also want to consider the whole idea of reinvigorating existing concepts in new contexts, and in that context I suppose the Commission’s communication ‘Rethinking Education’ is very much about reinvigorating existing ideas. So is the Council recommendation on validation. We hear a new and urgent tone in those documents looking for what are already existing concepts to be moved along at a greater pace.

So the first theme is: “integrating quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to improve education and training.” QA and QF themes, they always are a mouthful, apologies for that. If we consider the growth of quality assurance systems and qualifications frameworks we clearly note that they have been stimulated by broad policies and strategies that were initiated in Europe in the 1990s, some of which have been alluded to in the addresses of our previous speakers. Key milestones in an EU context would be the Lisbon 2000 agenda, ET 2020 and, of course, there are the Bologna Processes that have been going on since the late 1990s and the comparable Copenhagen process for VET, which has been in progress since the early part of the last decade.

These policies and strategies are rooted in different education and training subsystems. However everything from initial VET, to continuous VET, to higher education and increasingly to general and adult education does share identifiable aspirations and objectives. Clearly there is a strong emphasis on the delivery of lifelong learning opportunities for European citizens. There is also a strong aspiration and objective to deliver the skills
needed for knowledge driven and skills dependent economies. It is envisaged ultimately that education and training will contribute to economic development and social cohesion and I think both of those dimensions are equally important but there is a new environment that we are living in now. Within that environment, Europe and the global economy have been hit by a very, very strong financial crisis and the demands on education and training are intensifying as we try to establish a sound and sustainable basis and there is a new and stronger imperative on education and training systems to contribute to that recovery and then, indeed, to strong economic systems post recovery.

In a sense I think there are two dimensions to this. One is the idea of transforming education and training systems, but as Seán Ó Foghlú mentioned earlier, it’s not just about transforming existing subsystems in themselves. It’s mobilising them collectively to deliver a whole-system approach. What, ultimately, we hope that a whole-system approach will deliver is the right skills for employability. Now there are a whole heap of other things that education and training will deliver and is designed to deliver, but in a sense there is a particular focus here and the theme of the Conference on delivering the right skills for employability. Within this broad objective a role has been identified for the existing transparency and reform tools, including quality assurance systems and qualifications frameworks. What I have tried to argue in the paper is that the existing quality assurance and qualifications framework synergies, which have existed from the off, need to go deeper to meet new demands, towards a more integrated approach.

It seems to me that the whole idea of having an integrated approach to quality assurance systems and qualifications frameworks makes absolute sense; it seems to me anyway not to be an alien concept. They are natural bedfellows or partners that share common foundations and objectives. If we trace again the history of both developments since the 1990s, we see that they are rooted in a common model of European cooperation. Both developments share that approach to modernisation, to peer-to-peer learning and soft law, cooperation, and moving towards change.

The agenda for modernisation is common as well. It is rooted in a whole set of generally agreed principles: transparency, mutual trust, recognition of qualifications and mobility. It has these common objectives of: delivering lifelong learning, of delivering the skills provision needed for European citizens and ensuring and contributing to the employability of all our citizens, those who have gone through the learning processes, whatever the education and training system.

This common agenda is also given institutional expression, particularly now, through the formal processes of national qualifications framework implementation and though the processes at a European level for the referencing of national frameworks to the EQF or self-certifying national higher education qualifications frameworks to the Bologna Framework. What we are seeing here is that again both systems, quality assurance and qualifications frameworks moving inexorably together and very much in the same direction; and this is very, very clear within the referencing and self-certification processes. Both processes acknowledge the absolute centrality of quality assurance in education and training and they call for national qualifications frameworks to refer to quality assurance systems and they also provide for the involvement of quality assurance bodies formally within the referencing processes.

What is being revealed to us as all of these processes take place, and they are building up steadily; is that the national qualifications frameworks are absolutely dependent on solid quality assurance systems, without them they have no real basis, they are just shells and nice designs but they are not real.

What we also see when qualifications frameworks are built on solid quality assurance systems, is that the frameworks themselves become tools or instruments of quality. In a sense they can be seen as guarantors of the quality of the qualification that are within frameworks; gateways to quality, registers of quality assured qualifications.

That is, I suppose the bureaucratic dimension of integration, or one aspect of it. There is a deeper one as well, and this is the learning outcomes
approach. Interestingly, I suppose, since the
development of qualifications frameworks,
the whole learning outcomes approach has
become strongly identified with qualifications
frameworks. Qualifications themselves are
defined in terms of learning outcomes and the
whole structure of qualifications frameworks
is built on learning outcomes, whether you’re
talking about level descriptors or qualification
descriptors.

I think it is worth reminding ourselves from time
to time that the concept has for a long time
been intrinsic to and embedded in European
quality assurance systems. Seán Ó Foghlú
referred to the work done some years ago on
the development of the Dublin Descriptors and
it’s interesting that it was a group of quality
assurance agencies in all of their diversity that
were instrumental in moving ahead with that
work, and that played a big role then in the
development of the qualifications framework for
the European Higher Education Area.

We also see in the quality standards for the
European Higher Education Area, the European
Standards and Guidelines, a number of the
standards referring explicitly to the importance
of learning outcomes within the internal
quality assurance systems of higher education
institutions. We see increasingly too that those
outcomes are being assessed by quality bodies
in countries like Denmark and Sweden, for
example.

This link between quality assurance and learning
outcomes is also very much a part of the EQAVET framework, which, being designed
to support EQF implementation, is very much
concerned with the quality of the certification of
learning outcomes. So, learning outcomes then
are in a sense, the shared space where quality
assurance and qualifications frameworks come
together and where they can work together to
improve education and training.

Now, as always, when one maps out a brave
new world, one immediately comes up against
challenges. It seems to me, and as the paper
clearly sets out (these views are my opinion
and not necessarily to be foisted upon any
of the organising bodies here today) that the
fragmentation of subsystems is a real challenge
when you look at education and training systems
as a whole and when you are thinking about
delivering whole system impact. Where you want
to improve education and training for particular
objectives, this fragmentation is particularly
reflected in the institutional diversity and the
heterogeneity of the quality bodies themselves.

We see that the roles of quality systems
and quality bodies can be imprecise and
inconsistent, particularly in relation to the
implementation of qualifications frameworks.
We see this internally within countries and we
see it across national boundaries. I think it’s
very interesting when we can reflect on this
heterogeneity, there’s a very interesting piece
in the new version of the EQF Note 3, which lists out
the different types of bodies, and there’s about
six or seven categories of the different types of
quality bodies, ranging from ministries through
to independent quality agencies to funding
bodies with a quality brief. The problem here is
that with such institutional diversity there is
always a real danger of weakening the whole
system impact of these bodies. There is a sense
of, one: how can they work together? And two: who will lead the change process?

In addressing this issue I think that the European
cooperation processes have a role to play and
they can help in overcoming this. Working
through the European method of cooperation,
there is a great possibility to focus on potential
areas where we can learn about improving
the systems. Some of the areas that could
be explored are around how qualifications
frameworks and quality assurance systems are
institutionalised across the different subsystems of education and training. I think we can learn from each other from our different experiences of this kind of diverse institutionalisation and see what the models of good practice are; what are the best ways of delivering whole system change?

I think we need to explore further how the engagement of quality assurance and qualifications framework bodies takes place at a national level and how the synergies that are developing within the context of self-certification and referencing may develop further. Crucially, we also have to explore how the partner stakeholders, providers of education and training and the labour market may be engaged to participate more fully in the reform process. The engagement between VET and higher education, I think, is critical in this area, because I think there are models of good practice in both systems and we can learn from each other. In a sense it’s not just learning about each other but it’s about working together to deliver the right skills for employability. This is a challenge, but again, the European process of cooperation which has been so successful in delivering reform and change can actually help bring about this engagement, where VET and HE can come together to help us deliver the right skills for employability.

Okay, that’s theme one. We have ended it with a series of questions I’m not going to go through them all, but they will be the sort of questions we will be exploring in the context of the succeeding sessions.

Theme two: “using quality assurance to promote or improve the labour market relevance of qualifications.” When I received the brief from colleagues in QQI for exploring these themes, it stuck me very strongly that theme two and theme one were intimately connected and in a sense I am not really making a huge distinction between them. I think there’s a follow through maybe into more detail, but in sense I think they are both dealing with the same issues.

Rethinking Education, the Commission’s recent communication, seeks whole system change with particular emphasis on developing a whole set of different types of skills that are needed by learners and the modern economies. Transversal skills, including entrepreneurial skills, Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) related skills, language skills and foundational skills.

When you think though and consider what’s being said in Rethinking Education, the tone is absolutely very urgent, but it is not in any fundamental way a radical policy departure, it seems to me it’s a call for swifter and deeper follow through on already initiated reforms.

Labour market relevance is a concept that’s been embedded in the existing reforms for a very long time. The European Qualifications Framework has always been considered a tool that would contribute to meeting demand in, access to and integration of the labour market. The EQAVET framework, if you look through the quality indicators, is all about identifying labour market training needs and responsiveness to the labour market. We see it too in the context of the Bologna higher education reforms. It’s notable, for example, that European Standards and Guidelines standard 1.2 seeks that:

“Quality assurances processes within higher education should provide for regular feedback from employers.”

So the concepts are already there. I suppose the challenge then is turning those concepts into practicalities. What can quality assurance and quality framework bodies do in terms of working together to improve the labour market relevance of qualifications? Well, on the practical front, one area is that they can actually help bring about this engagement, where VET and HE can come together to help us deliver the right skills for employability.

There is also the common space between qualifications frameworks and quality assurance: learning outcomes. Quality bodies could test whether qualifications reflect intended learning outcomes and whether these relate to specialist skills needed for particular sectors or the basic and transversal skills that are mentioned in Rethinking Education. Another contribution, again from the quality assurance
and quality framework area, is the whole business of including or aligning those non-public qualifications that play such a big part in the labour market. How can these be aligned and included in qualifications frameworks? Quality assurance is critical to this to engender confidence in that conclusion.

There is the work of building a language and communicating that language. This is hugely challenging, both based on learning outcomes and other emerging tools like the European skills competence and occupations taxonomy, ESCO. This is a huge challenge, controversial in some aspects as well, trying to get agreement on the common language, but it is certainly a space that quality assurance and quality frameworks bodies can be involved in.

I think there are some general challenges that also need to be considered. There is the role of employers and social partners in qualifications design. As we know, that is very, very well developed in some countries. Germany is a notable example, with a long tradition of social partner collaboration in the design of VET qualifications in particular. Can these models of good practice be replicated elsewhere? Again it’s an area for discussion; maybe not in their entirety but aspects of them. The role of employers and social partners is less well developed in other countries in terms of the design of qualifications, and sometimes there is a great imbalance between the supply side and the demand side of actors in qualifications design. When I talk about the supply side I am talking about the bodies that make the qualifications and the demand side is the employers that might want them. Often there is simply a cultural gap in understanding between these sets of actors. Maybe this is where the quality assurance and qualifications frameworks bodies can get involved and help bridge the gap between both sides.

There is also a whole area around the expectations and responsibilities that employers have in the area of delivering the right qualifications for the right skills. There are responsibilities on employers too, and one role certainly that they could get involved in is in assisting youth in particular to develop the maturity for work, through internships, and also to improve their overall employability.

We are beginning to see some examples of that emerging in different countries, but maybe it’s something that could be ramped up considerably.

The quality assurance systems and qualification framework implementation processes can actually help bridge the gap between the labour market and the education and training actors. There is great scope for bridging that understanding through employer participation and quality activities such as programme and qualification design, institutional quality reviews and so forth, and increasingly quality bodies and quality framework bodies, they can use instruments such as employer surveys to begin to understand more clearly what employers need and how those needs might be delivered.

This is very much a challenging task, coordinating systematic engagement of education and labour market actors. It is very, very challenging and some people might argue that maybe it’s not an appropriate role for quality assurance and qualifications bodies. I think we need to have that discussion. Do they want to step into this space and take on the role of leadership in it? Often the debate goes on and on but no one is actually trying to shape it or lead it. It’s challenging because it requires a great level of expertise, it requires sophisticated and committed approaches in terms of communication, to be persuasive in communicating, often very, very difficult tools like learning outcomes and ESCO. It does require great expertise and an ability to communicate that. So that also is a huge challenge.

So again we have some questions at the end of the discussion of this theme, and we are asking some fundamental questions here.

Moving on to theme three: “the validation of non-formal and informal learning and how quality and qualifications frameworks can facilitate validation.”

Consensus now exists, I think, given the formal expression and the Council Recommendation on validation, on the importance of making visible the knowledge skills and competence acquired by individuals through their life and work experiences. The validation process is a huge area of opportunity where quality systems and qualifications come together. Frameworks can
combine to improve the labour market relevance of qualifications.

I won't go into all the detail here but there is general consensus that validation can contribute to increasing motivation for lifelong learning, enhancing employability and mobility and improving the functioning of the labour market by facilitating a better match between skills and labour demand and all that follows from that, including enhancing competitiveness and economic growth.

Validation, of course, is a very complex process comprising potentially four elements. There is the identification of an individual's learning outcomes; the documentation of those outcomes; the assessment of those outcomes; and the certification of the results of the assessment. One doesn't have to go through all of those processes, one, two, three or all four steps may be sufficient, depending on the needs of individual learners. To do it properly though it requires extensive stakeholder involvement. You can see the huge range of stakeholders that have been identified by the Recommendation as potential participants in validation processes, everyone from employers to civil society organisations, and education and training providers.

What qualifications frameworks and quality systems can do is that they can strengthen above all trust in validations processes. This principle has been established in the context of the EQF Recommendation and also in the context of the Bologna Process to the Leuven/Louvain-la-Neuve Communiqué. What they can do is that they can provide a supporting methodology and reference points for the validation of skills and competence through the use of learning outcomes and levels. The systematic implementation of validation by 2018 (as called for in the recommendation) will be very much dependent on the mobilisation of qualification frameworks and quality assurance processes and structures.

In this I think we need to be able to draw on the experience of VET and higher education professionals, both in the quality assurance and qualifications frameworks field, both at the national and the European levels. I think we need to have a deeper engagement at the European level through the EQF Advisory Group, the Bologna Framework Authorities and, of course, the coordinating European bodies, ENQA and EQAVET. What all of these bodies can do is to help coordinate the diverse stakeholders in engagement and participation. Above all, they can help bring credibility to the validation
assessment and certification processes and ensure that the qualifications that are acquired through validation are recognised.

In taking on this work there are quite a lot of issues that need to be addressed, some of them are old and some of them are new. The whole issue of trust, recognition and currency is where quality assurance and qualifications frameworks have the biggest part to play. There are other issues too around the complexity and the best methodologies to use, and also cost implications. Other areas need to be considered as well. I mentioned earlier in another context the whole issue of including private, non-formal qualifications. Validation is also a potential tool for addressing this issue. So it’s an interesting issue whether it should be done through inclusion and/or alignment with frameworks or through validation. Of course, with everything that is happening in digital learning and the growth of massive open online courses and other types of learning acquired through open education resources, they too will increasingly come into this space.

So, I am just going to leave the questions there hanging for a second, we will come back to them again later in the day or over the next two days when we are addressing these questions through the breakout groups.

So I will move on swiftly now to the final theme: “promoting confidence in Europe’s qualifications on a global scale.” The tools and instruments that have been developed since the 1990s have been hugely influential in a global context. European Quality Assurance and European Qualifications Frameworks are attracting a huge amount of attention globally and are stimulating engagement between Europe and its international partners, and there are a number of different dimensions to this: policy dialogues, desire to enhance mutual cooperation, furthering of qualifications recognition, and, in particular, an engagement on Europe’s transnational architecture for quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. Many countries are interested in engaging with the Bologna Process or, indeed, the EQF, and looking at them as models for use elsewhere.

One of the ways that this engagement on a global context is taking place is in trying to build connectivity globally. We see this in a whole range of different activities; the EQF is being used to assist the development of VET, for example; and lifelong learning in the EU enlargement areas, neighbouring areas and central Asia through the work of the European Training Foundation. There is also considerable work being done on trying to create and connect national, regional and global higher education spaces, and we see this through the extension of the TUNING Europe process, the TUNING Latin America, TUNING USA, TUNING Africa, and, indeed, even within the context of the Bologna Process to TUNING Russia. And we also have the Bologna Policy Forum, which is helping to bring about this greater engagement.

What we are seeing increasingly is a desire amongst some countries to signal an affinity to both EQF and the Bologna Framework through bilateral engagements and engagements with countries that are already aligned to the overarching qualifications frameworks. Ireland has had experience of this through its engagement with New Zealand and Australia. The overarching frameworks are also influential in the development of regional qualification framework development, and we have seen this in Africa, Asia and the Middle East, and it is contributing to thinking on regional connectivity of qualifications frameworks, from region to region, and even it is now stimulating debate on the development of global levels.

Europe wants to be very much at the heart of this discussion, but there are challenges, of course, associated with this too, particularly - can or should European Qualifications Frameworks and QA models be transferred and translated easily into emerging democracies? There are questions I think that we do need to ask: what are the minimum acceptable standards required for building international trust and global connectivity? We have had a fair amount of experience of trying to build up trust amongst ourselves, so that issue is obviously is a big issue as we connect with the rest of the world in terms of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks.

Some of the areas that we might expect to see as standards are: the whole area of wide stakeholder involvement; autonomous qualifications frameworks and quality assurance bodies and; possibly independent student
participation in quality assurance processes, which is a big part of the emerging European tradition.

The transnational architecture of the European quality assurance and qualifications frameworks instruments and tools is a real achievement and as a result Europe is well positioned to benefit from global developments in these domains. I do think it is always worth considering and maybe taking stock that the tools in themselves are not sufficient. They must be seen to deliver real change and I think it’s important that when we think about the expansiveness of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance that we are always all the time trying to reconnect it with what we’re doing internally in terms of delivering real change. I think if we are to have continuing authority in these spheres, I think it would be crucial that we do actually deliver the outcomes for which these tools have been instituted, in particular we have to meet the expectations of the learner, the labour market and the wider society.

Okay, that’s all I want to say. We have a whole heap of questions there which again we will work through during the breakout workshops. Thank you.

Gordon Clark

Thank you very much, Jim, and thanks also to Seán and Xavier. Food for thought: why are we all here? We have major challenges and obstacles; the centrality of the learner; the need for greater and better information; better communication; dialogue; transparency. A lot of issues I think we need to tackle.

The ball is now in your court, you’ve heard the keynote speakers, a lot of the issues and I am sure you have a lot of thoughts in your head which you would like to communicate so you will have the opportunity in sessions 2, 3 and 4 to do that. Please participate actively in the discussions, be provocative, come forward with proposals, disagree but be constructive also. We are very much looking forward to your feedback.
Session 2: Integrating quality assurance and qualifications systems to improve education and training systems

Gordon Clark, Chair of the Board of QQI

Moving to Session 2, this is your turn really. We’re now handing over to you as participants to get down to the “nitty gritty”, to find out what this all means in practice. How do we address the challenges and obstacles which we heard about in the first session?

Our moderator for the conference is Pat Leahy, who is a journalist, Deputy Editor of the Sunday Business Post Irish newspaper and a frequent contributor to radio and television programmes on politics and current affairs. Some of you may remember Pat from the conference which was held here in spring 2010, and I don’t remember the title of the conference but I remember that it was nicknamed the “ash cloud conference” because of the disruption to airlines caused by the eruption of the Eyjafjallajökull volcano in Iceland.

Pat Leahy, Moderator

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I do well remember the infamous ash cloud conference, infamous not perhaps the best word because an awful lot of delegates found themselves stranded in Dublin for several days. There are worse places to be stranded. You may be aware that it’s St. Patrick’s Day on Sunday, so, should you find yourself stranded again, I am sure there will be a programme of suitable entertainment laid on for you.

I heard some of Gordon’s remarks at the last session when he laid out some of the key questions that you will address over the next day and a half, one of which was: “why are we all here?” I think that may be overstating the ambition of the Conference somewhat. We might try and keep it a little tighter than that.

Just to outline briefly the structure that we will be employing in all our sessions. The sessions are an hour and a half each and they will be broken into three thirty-minute segments, the first of which will be a panel discussion among a series of expert panellists. The second thirty minutes will revert to you; and we will have table discussions. Your questions, conclusions and observations will be recorded and incorporated into the conference conclusions which will be presented tomorrow. The third part of each session will be a floor discussion, and we are as anxious, of course, to hear your views and your observations on the subjects under discussion.

With that let me introduce our first panel to discuss the use of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to improve integrating education and training systems. Lucien Bollaert is from the Netherlands/Flanders Accreditation Organisation; Sean Feerick is from the European Quality Assurance in Vocational Education and Training (EQAVET); Mile Dzelalija is from the University of Split in Croatia. Finally, Jens Bjornavold is from the European centre for the Development of Vocational Training (CEDEFOP).

I will start, if I may, with a question to Sean Feerick. You note the need for a shared language and definition of concepts which is readable across a diversity of education and training systems. Do you think such commonalities exist currently across the European metasystems?

Sean Feerick, EQAVET Secretariat

If I could start my answer to that question by referring very briefly to one of the points raised this morning in the plenary sessions. When we think of all of these processes and instruments that we are all familiar with within the confines of this space at a European level, we really do need to focus much more on the citizen, on the learner, in our reflection today. This is something we are quite conscious of in the EQAVET context. There is a real need for a paradigm shift, I would say, when it comes to how we organise our work.
This brings me then to how we can look at developing some shared concepts between VET and higher education and I think there are indeed shared concepts, because we are dealing, albeit in different contexts and at different levels, with a certain number of common issues. Those common issues we even define, I think, in rather similar ways. The common issues are, for instance, building flexible pathways for learners, for young people and, indeed, not-so-young people as they move through lifelong learning. We are also talking about the professional development of teachers, of trainers, of head teachers, of management personnel who are involved in the delivery of courses, and in the delivery of qualifications. We are also talking about the need for responsiveness to labour market needs. I think the work we do in partnership in the VET and higher education subsystems, with social partners for instance, with the representative of the world of employment and employees is extremely important. We have to become much more proactive in the recognition of previously acquired training, knowledge, formal, informal and non-formal learning. So, these are the common issues, I think, that can help us to create a greater sense of commonness of purpose in the way we try to bring together the experiences of both the higher education and VET sectors.

We are all involved in the process of ensuring mutual trust in qualifications. In regard to the recognition of qualifications that we are dealing with, and we are also very anxious to ensure that from the learner’s point of view that you have a pathway which can take the learner from a vocational education and training module, if you like, into higher education but also from higher education back into VET as the professional requirements and professional development requirements of individuals progress over their lifetime in the world of work.

Lucien Bollaert, Netherlands/Flanders Accreditation Organisation (NVAO)

I am afraid there is not a high degree of common understanding. First of all, I have to say that as far as I am concerned: learning outcomes are the central issue. We are not only dealing with the same things, we are also interlinked around the learner, who is at the centre of the whole affair, as has been said already today.

Let me make clear first of all, in higher education alone there is not even a common understanding of what a learning outcome is. It has become clear in the discussions in the revision of the European Standards and Guidelines, for example, that some want to deal with learner outcomes and some want to clarify the difference between the intended learning outcomes and the achieved learning outcomes.

Although I don’t want to go into semantics or a semantic discussion - when I was a member of the first experts group on developing the European Qualifications Framework under Gordon, somebody around the table said at a certain point: “look, I found 275 definitions of competence.” Yet there is, I feel, a common understanding or interpretation growing. This is that when it is intended, that it should certainly be achieved. That is a question of the assessment by the institution. The assessment by the quality assurance agencies is to make sure or to prove that the intended learning outcome has been achieved. The overall concept which is behind it, both in VET and in higher education, seems to be that learning outcomes are an integration of knowledge, abilities or skills and attitudes. Now, in fact this very much concentrates, of course, on abilities or the skills. I know I am not using the word ‘skill’ according to the Irish or the European definition.

While higher education, of course, focuses more on knowledge, there is one thing which has been forgotten which is attitude. And I refer to attitude in order to introduce important transversal competencies or key competencies. I think there is a conflict between our curiosity, and taking responsibility: between developing a critical approach and analysis and, let’s say, short term goals around employability. That barrier is in the way because of the challenges on the global scale that we are experiencing.

Pat Leahy

Thanks, Sean.

Lucien, if I could turn to you. You talk about the significance of learning outcomes in your response to Jim’s paper, is there a common understanding and interpretation of learning outcomes in VET and in HE?
The third aspect of my answer would be that there should be a common understanding and interpretation not only between VET and higher education but among all stakeholders. That means the employers; that means, first of all, the learners. Trust is, of course, one of the central concepts, but in Europe that trust needs to be earned more and more. One of the ways to earn trust is to have transparency. Transparency proves that things have been checked, although I don’t like checklists. You need to be sure that that is the information that is on the certificate or on the diploma or on the degree as far as learning outcomes is concerned is trustworthy.

Pat Leahy

Thanks, Lucien, food for thought there.

Jens, if I could turn to you, you note that a future challenge for quality assurance arrangements is to combine and balance the current focus on education and training inputs and a stronger attention to something Lucien mentioned, the learning outcomes. Can you talk us through that a bit more?

Jens Bjornavold, CEDEFOP

I think first of all it’s important in this discussion not to say that the focus is on input into the teaching and training process in the institutions behind education training. I mean that is important and you need very robust and strong quality assurance regimes, arrangements focusing on this, and, this is work which has to continue. However, when we introduce qualification frameworks, their defining feature is learning outcomes. That means that we need, in addition to this focus on training - the teaching and training input and so on - to also focus on the quality assurance of the defining features of qualification frameworks. I think what helps us a lot is the way qualifications are defined by the EQF recommendation, because it stresses that the qualification is learning outcomes which have been assessed according to a standard by a competent body. These are four very important aspects: the learning outcomes; the assessment; the standard; and the competent body.

If you look at the quality assurance arrangements as you see them today, both at national and at European level, although they touch these issues they don’t touch them in a sufficiently systematic way. I think there is a need to really consider, how can quality assurance arrangements address the definition, the description, the use we make of learning outcomes? How broad should they be? How narrow? How do we balance the specific skill competences with the generic skill competences? How do we work between institutions, between countries in gradually creating this common language? These are concrete, practical things which are not sufficiently addressed.

The second thing is that you cannot use learning outcomes in isolation. For qualifications, it is essential that you are able to assess these learning outcomes. So you have to ask, well how do we work with quality assurance arrangements so that they support the assessment? Without them the creditability, the currency of the qualifications is threatened. I think this combination of looking systematically now via quality assurance at the learning outcomes and how we define them together, but also linking it to a quality assurance of the assessment validation is really critical for pursuing the shift towards learning outcomes which the qualification frameworks are about. And, of course, the focus then on the standards and the awarding bodies. But I mean this gives us a very practical and concrete focus, which I don’t think is sufficiently followed up so far and in a way it establishes a programme for developing quality assurance but it has to be balanced, of course, with a focus on the inputs into the teaching and training processes.

Pat Leahy

Okay, thanks. We might explore that notion of learning outcomes or shared definitions of learning outcomes.

I want to come to Mile. In your reaction you emphasise the need for threshold learning outcomes and a need for balance between accountability and enhancement in quality assurance, can you discuss your thoughts on this a little more for us.
Mile Đzelalija, University of Split, Croatia

Well, the term “threshold learning outcomes” is nothing more than knowledge, skills and competence, that the individual can demonstrate through assessment. Quality assurance systems should cover both: so the minimum, the assessed part of the learning outcome but also continuous improvement of the education and training process. Well here we are trying to discuss how to integrate quality assurance and qualifications framework to support education and training. The main elements of quality assurance in general are in fact the quality assurance of education and training processes, but also specifically the assessment of learning outcomes, the certification of learning outcomes and: of increasing importance, labour market relevance and also fitness-for-purpose.

If we look at it from the other side, from the qualifications framework, we know that more and more qualifications frameworks are introducing non-formal and informal learning. So it means that there is no focus looking from the qualifications framework to the way the individual achieved competencies, learning outcomes. The focus is more on assessment of learning outcomes.

We see that there are many differences between quality assurance within qualifications frameworks and quality assurance in general within this part of the education and training process, so it’s really a basic question but later maybe we can have basic questions on how to integrate in order to support education and training processes.

General panel discussion

Mr Leahy

If I can address a question generally or maybe I will come to you first, Sean, if I may. I think I saw you nodding vigorously at a point during Jens’ contribution there where he was talking about learning outcomes, what’s you view on learning outcomes and the need for a shared definition of learning outcomes? I might come to you afterwards then, Lucien.

Mr Feerick

Absolutely, I think what is important in all of this is what the person coming out with the qualification is able to do. That has to have a currency in the employment market; it has to have a currency in terms of that person’s ongoing professional development. I think that one of the most beneficial parts of the work we have been doing in the EQAVET context over the last number of years has been looking and, indeed, Jens has been a key partner with us in this process, of looking together at the question of learning outcomes, looking at how learning outcomes are constructed as units of learning for instance. What we found in all of this process is that when you bring the key players from the VET or the higher education sectors together and I’m sure it’s the same in the general education area, they may be using different terminology to talk about what are actually very similar realities. I think that if we are serious about making a European space for lifelong learning a reality, then we need much more of this work on concrete areas where we are dealing with the realities of how qualifications are assessed and how qualifications are certified.

Mr Leahy

Does that mean then that the definitions have to be almost linguistically elastic but in their substance they need to be more aligned?

Mr Feerick

Yes, I would say that. You’re dealing with two factors really: you’re dealing with understanding how concepts are described across sub-systems; you are also dealing with how concepts are defined within specific national contexts because education and training systems are very culturally and contextually dependent. They have emerged from a particular historical context et cetera, so there is an awful lot of un-packaging that’s necessary in order to understand what are the key areas that people are concerned with. I think that one of the successful stories in the European cooperation process has been that it does give – it’s a very slow process, but this has provided people, particularly policy makers, with the possibility of understanding where they come from, where they each come from so
that they can construct together some of these common responses that we are now grappling with here.

**Mr Bollaert**

Of course the first thing that should be clear is that learning outcomes are quite at the centre and interlinked with everything. By the way, I produced a slide to make it clear in a kind of ideal situation.

Now, I’m not going to analyse this at once but you can see that everything is interlinked very much and that at the centre, of course, is the learning process. In answer to Jens, using international and national qualifications frameworks, using those descriptions of learning outcomes is in that scheme a kind of input. Then, of course, referring to Prof Dzelalija, I don’t think using those intended learning outcomes, those threshold learning outcomes that you can make any compromise there. The learners should attain or achieve those minimum threshold standards. The enhancement is of the process of how to achieve those learning outcomes, and that, I think, is both with internal quality assurance and external quality assurance in which all the stakeholders are involved. There you have the mixture of accountability to society and otherwise continuing enhancement.

**Mr Bjornavold**

I think the point here, what is very important is that this speaking about outcomes and input, in a way might be a bit confusing. I think what is important in that figure is that the learner is in the centre, it’s a learning process and: how do we promote it? How do we develop policies for institutions which in a way help people to learn? Which would erect barriers or obstacles to learning? I think that is the big picture here, I mean that is what we are trying to do.

I think when we then discuss learning outcomes in this context; we see that learning outcomes are used for very different purposes: they’re used to define descriptors for frameworks at a European and national level but it’s also used to describe qualifications, to describe curricula, to set standards, to set assessment criteria. But what is perhaps even more important is that learning outcomes influence the teaching and learning processes. They are used by teachers to set the objective of the learning process. How can it help the individual to understand what is required within the learning process which is ahead of him or her? I mean this is very important and there you see that there is a link here between the outcome perspective as we speak about it and the learning process. I think this is really one of the challenges in the way our teachers and trainers institutions use learning outcomes. Are they, sort of, using this as a part of the pedagogies that they are now promoting?

I think this is an issue. The question is is this learning outcomes language we are speaking about? Is it used for practical purposes by practitioners, by teachers? Is it influencing the learning process? Because the risk in a way is that we will have a learning outcomes concept which stays at the level of policy makers, those in this room, and doesn’t really go down and affect the way we assess the learning of individual people, it doesn’t affect the way we think about the learning process.

I think this is really the challenge. So perhaps I think your initial question was the linkage between outcomes and input and I think this is really where we need to focus. Of course, this
shows that this is a very long-term process but we think we need to set very practical objectives, we need to work concretely on these things in a way, we cannot just continue to speak in the broad terms that we define. We need to work on assessment; we need to work on the education of teachers and trainers on how they use learning outcomes and so on.

Prof. Dzelalija

Well, learning outcomes are at the centre for sure. They’re the most important elements in both quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. A difference in understanding of this concept, of course, causes difficulties for implementation and this is important. Well there are, let’s say, the different institutions, universities, et cetera using a really narrow definition of learning outcomes as just statements of what an individual student will be able to do at the end. Sometimes they think that it is enough to write a couple of sentences. But I would really like to join Jens’ elements of learning outcomes and assessment. Even to use learning outcomes and learning assessments at the same time or to focus to standards of assessment of bodies or institutions et cetera. And then we can really think that it will be possible to influence education and training institutions to improve those processes.

Mr Bollaert

Sean has already used the words ‘paradigm shift’. The essential paradigm shift in working with learning outcomes and also which is, as far as I am concerned, the real answer to the whole global challenge is the paradigm shift that in formal education and training we moved from in to out. Now this is changing, in fact, from out to in. ‘Out’ means “which learning outcomes, which competencies are asked for by the global society?” then comes assessment. The next question is: how can we assess them? And the next question is: how can we achieve that? So, instead of from in to out in former times, you’ve gone from out to in. That is, as far as I am concerned, the real paradigm shift.

Mr Leahy

I thank the panellists for their contributions to this session. We will move on now to the table discussions.

Table discussions

The first question for discussion is: “what in your view are the main QA methods that promote NQA implementation?” We’re talking about things like standard setting, certification, inspection regimes, institutional review, programme approval and monitoring validation and how do we assess their effectiveness?

The second question is: “should quality coordinating bodies at European level like ENQA and EQAVET work more closely together in the interest of promoting consistent implementation of learning outcomes based in QFs and improving education and training?”

The discussions at each table will be recorded by a rapporteur.

3.6.1 Question 1 table responses

What, in your view, are the main methods that promote NQF implementation (e.g. standard setting, certification, inspection regimes, institutional review, programme approval and monitoring, validation)? And how do we assess their effectiveness?

In both the VET and higher education sectors learning outcomes are basic for the organisation and assessment of programme, but the value of knowledge, skills and competence is different. The sectors need to grow closer together and become more permeable to fit learners for entry to the workforce.

The introduction of qualifications frameworks tends to increase the emphasis on the accountability side of QA. The extent of this accountability depends on the level of regulation of the institution or awarding body by the QA body. The balance between autonomy and regulation is key.

Various parts of education and training systems were created as parallel worlds; sometimes with high walls between them. Each of these parallel
systems was designed to evolve within its own world, but has very limited tools for evolving in a dynamic way with the other parallel system each side of it.

There is a massive exercise needed to widely promote ‘common concepts and common terms’. Learning outcomes can be the currency to enable agreement with all stakeholders (especially social partners) on ‘concepts’ in order to build trust.

All methods are important but they can mean different things within different countries. The role of stakeholders and actors is very important at national and local level:

- Institutional review is more developed at HET and needs more development in VET
- System level and institution level QA are both important.
- It is more difficult to measure effectiveness but horizontal and vertical mobility of the learner is one measure.

The key issue is the ownership of qualifications frameworks and strength of stakeholder involvement.

Diverse methods exist and are valid but we need European level agreement to build trust so that the external community trusts the QA and qualifications etc. of different national frameworks.

We need to look at systems plus institutional level action.

We need to look at general education and use common reference points and learning outcomes, equivalence at international level. There is a need to focus on the end of upper secondary level.

What is the role of regulatory bodies? Who determine who accesses the market for qualifications, beyond rhetoric?

- We used to see differences / similarities, exchange best practice and knowledge
- Get into concrete steps to link to assessment as made by Jens

Information provision to students is key. So many do not understand the value of QA; we need:

1. Institutions to provide relevant information to students.
2. Public responsibility for the reliability of that information.
3. Students to be educated about what they need to look for.

The main QA methods centre on communication; transparency and Information for beneficiaries, current and potential. Not inspection, but review and audit.

Internal QA is of paramount importance (Programme design / validation). These must refer to the NQF and ensure that they are appropriate to its levels. The external role is also important. We must be able to check that internal QA works well but must also promote trust. External QA must provide the sectorial overview and assurance of standards.

Teaching, learning and assessment methods are the core principles that should be the same for all.

The QA system should be a workable system. We need to revise the NQF values, these need to be the key focus. The level descriptors in the NQF need to distil down to the learning outcomes so there is a common understanding of what, for example, a level 5 programme should contain.

Evaluation of the assessment criteria is important and needs to be reviewed on a regular basis. There should be a certain degree of commonality in the discipline across Europe.

The main challenge is how to implement these methods once the framework is in place. It is essential for all stakeholders to be involved otherwise it won’t happen. Some frameworks are devised without any QA systems in place; others develop more organically through quality assurance systems. There can be a major problem if we don’t involve providers in development of frameworks. A re-articulation of the question: how do you co-ordinate QA methods so that they complement and synchronise the NQFs?

- Even with no NQF there would still be QA procedures.
- How do we operate in a field where learning outcomes do not exist?
The role of learning outcomes in the QA methodology, not the NQF is the key question.

Learning outcomes should be set nationally with a legal basis to be assessed.

The context for learning outcomes is important. The challenge is where qualifications in NQFs are not nationally owned. This makes a national approach very difficult; it also makes progression very difficult.

Ownership of qualifications is important. How to assure quality in the private sector is a challenge.

Non-formal and informal learning should be linked to a specific qualification within the framework. It is important not to imply that the non-formal and informal learning is put on the framework.

What are the QA tools that are used to place qualifications on the NQF? These tools must be transparent and the evidence for placement must be clear. We need clear criteria, at a national level, trusted by all, to place non-formal informal learning on the NQF.

In a learner centred model what is the role of the teacher? Research into learning outcomes is needed and stakeholder involvement is crucial. The NQF needs to be embraced at teacher level and among stakeholders; not merely constrained to policy makers.

The NQF links to QA via assessment of the learning outcomes. Trust is predicated on the effectiveness of the QA process.

Learners are at the centre. This needs to be communicated but in language that is understood. The processes in the Irish context are working. Measuring effectiveness is a different question and we need to go back to the learner.

Cross fertilisation and models of practice are necessary. Can we drill down into the question of diversity of learners and reach common understanding of diversity and outcomes? There are lots of different ways of getting there. There is a need for longitudinal evaluation of the pathways taken by adult learners. Getting feedback from learners – we should engage more with them.

It is necessary to have clarity in learning outcomes.

They are all relevant methods but only effective if learning outcomes are integrated. NQFs should be a means to the end of relevance for a diverse system.

Main QA methods and effectiveness:

1. General benchmark standards or indicators focussed on discipline – professional discipline standards; qualification standards from the NQF with attention to learning outcomes; generic competences focussed on a certification / qualification. Learning outcomes. All standards (except for in Portugal) focus on learning outcomes and ascent.

2. Effectiveness – very little, just implementation.

Programme accreditation should test applications based on national discipline standards or professional standards and qualification standards. Institutions should be assessed on understandings of learning outcomes.

All of these QA methods are equally important and interdependent within a quality framework.

Communication is considered to be a missing element as is professional development.

The relevance of the quality framework requires continual evaluation for ‘BUY – IN’ rather than ‘Box – Ticking’.

Question 2 table responses

Should quality coordinating bodies at a European level (i.e. ENQA and EQAVET) work more closely together in the interest of promoting consistent implementation of learning outcomes—based NQFs and improving education and training? Should they also work more closely with the QF–EHEA and EQF coordinating bodies (EQF advisory group, BFUG and ENIC-NARIC) in the same pursuit?

The European Coordination bodies should work more closely together to promote consistent implementation of LO based NQFs. But more
critical is the active involvement and visible engagement with teachers and learners. There is at present too large a distance between policy and practice.

We need each agency to reflect on its own role and contribution, in terms of greater transparency, regarding these roles and methods. Documentation of implementation experience would help different agencies learn more from each other.

Much more communication and joint activities to promote understanding between them and the sector they represent, but no mergers.

More intensive cooperation is needed but on specific concrete projects. We need to take legislative decisions to support implementation.

Permeability at EQF levels 5 and 6 is an issue.

At a European level; coordination and codes of practice are necessary.

EQAVET does not explicitly mention learning outcome in its indicators. It must develop this element and/or additional indicators.

Networks are also important in building trust in NARIQ NRPs (not just central bodies). The challenge is to balance inclusiveness and similarity between systems and diversity.

Qualifications frameworks in Europe are inclusive and open to non-public bodies.

Yes – all of these agencies and initiatives should work more closely together.

How? They should approach QA more closely together.

It is important to ensure that referencing of NQF to EQF is understood by citizens, which means mobility. This suggests a wider recognition of standards. We need to have an understanding at a European level of what a “Nurse” should be able to do, to facilitate mobility, however, the issue, it is suggested, would be around having a common syllabus. This is difficult.

It must be a good thing but we desperately want QA to be fit for purpose and one size does not fit all.

Should there be a minimum volume to achieve an award?

Who are the bodies to be included?

It is difficult to say that they should not work together – challenge is in how this can be managed in a cost effective way? How can we assure that co-operation is effective? We need to ensure that all countries are included in the discussions, we need robust reporting and feedback mechanisms. Clear work plans could help. We need joint discussion meetings, greater communication and co-ordination.

Yes, but stakeholders need to work with other sectors as well e.g. employers and guidance counsellors.

Yes, there is no question that they should – to explore synergies. What are they currently doing? There needs to be greater articulation of what they do. QA assumes an NQF is the implemented system; in some cases this is true but in others the system has a QA grid imposed on it. Integrating quality presupposes the question ‘Can quality and NQFs be integrated?’

Yes, however there is an issue of coherence across the supporting qualification frameworks. There is still inconsistent terminology and implementation of learning outcomes. The challenge is more about a clash of frameworks at European Levels.

These quality bodies have brought together many aspects and have already enhanced our common understanding and trust at EU Levels.

There is more to be done using these structures.

Integration between the VET and HE would help progress.

Also it is important to actively liaise with bodies such as BFUG & ENIC – NARIC for more practical implementation of policies and tools.

Additional table discussion

Comments

The integration of QA and qualifications frameworks may be an inhibitor preventing non-statutory awarding bodies from seeking inclusion in NQFs. There is a need to look at examples of how this is being addressed
We need to be careful to ensure that discussion on progression relates to fields of learning and not across fields of learning e.g. Engineer at level 6 cannot transfer to Dentist at Level 7. Progression and what it means requires clarification to the general public and all stakeholders.

1. Should the learning outcomes between HET and VET be consistent?
2. The role and responsibility of providers and QA responsibilities is overlooked.
3. How can QA support the NQF and help to ensure there is consistency in defining one level of one qualification.

Plenary discussion

*Pat Leahy*

We will now move on to the floor discussion. Your responses during the table discussion will be processed overnight and will feed into conclusions tomorrow.

So, I have a couple of questions that I would like to throw out, but also any points that you want to make that were relevant to the panel discussion that we have would be welcome. Of course, any questions that you have for individual panellists that we had up here, you can direct them at them.

So, we are anxious to get as much discussion as possible from the floor. So let me start with a very general question: in your opinion how can quality assurance and qualifications frameworks improve education and training systems?

Maybe while you gather you thoughts, I could direct that very general question at one of our previous panellists. Mile, would you like take that? Can we have a microphone up here please? Thanks. Thank you, Mile.

*Mile Dželalija*

Very briefly, I think quality assurance really supports the process of education training by looking, measuring, assessing the assessment level. Also the relevance of achieved learning outcomes et cetera, that we discussed. But qualifications frameworks are seen as an instrument bringing additional transparent tools to support quality assurance systems. These specifically look into assessment, look transparently into fitness for purpose and also the certification process. So, it's not different instruments, it's just supporting instruments to bring more trust in amongst us, among different countries but also among different stakeholders. So, briefly, I see it as just additional supportive instrument for already existing quality assurance system.

I would say also additionally that we should not think that it's possible to measure, to assess all kind of learning outcomes with the same type of assessment. We probably need different methods for different kinds of learning outcomes. This means then implicitly that we are not able... in fact individuals probably achieved more learning outcomes, more competencies, than we are able to assess at the end.

Implicitly it's important to keep for at least some kind of learning outcomes, still to keep students, individuals within the teaching and training processes, because we are not able to measure all.

*Bernie Brady, AONTAS*

My name is Bernie Brady and I come from the National Adult Learning Organisation AONTAS and we have within our strategic plan a priority which is based on the voice of the learner, so this is more a general comment I suppose that reflects some of the discussion at our table. Earlier on in the discussion there was a great emphasis placed on the learner being at the centre of quality assurance and national qualifications frameworks and I think that is very welcome. But I think one of the things we need to look at is what we understand by the learner and when we're looking at systems that we need to look at the diversity of learners that are there, both in terms of educational qualifications, in terms of abilities, in terms of experiences and also we need to take account when we are framing policy that people do not move in a straight line, that they actually take many pathways to where they want to go.

One of the points that was made at our table was, already within Ireland, within the
framework: things like standard setting, certification inspection regimes and all that are in place, pretty much. But how we assess their effectiveness is a bigger question. I think perhaps one of the things that we were saying at our table is that you need to ask the people who are coming out at the end of these, namely learners, and there’s ways that you can actually do that but I think there’s a huge gap between people who are making policy and organising the frameworks and what kind of response they get from learners.

There are ways of actually doing this. We do some of this work ourselves in relation to bringing learners in and getting them to look at their pathways and the way they move forward. So if I think if we do that, I think you’re better able then to reach some kind of common understanding about what you mean by learner centeredness and then certainly to measure outcomes from it.

One of the other points that came up, and I think this is something that we have been looking for for a long time, is to have some kind of longitudinal evaluation research where we go in and out, back and forward all the time to people and find out whether what we are actually proposing as policy and practice in quality assurance and within the framework is actually working.

Colin Tuck, EQAR

Thank you, my name is Colin Tuck, working for the European Quality Assurance Register, EQAR. I tried to come up with a very general answer to the very general question, I would say quality assurance in qualifications frameworks improves higher education because potential learners can rely on the qualification living up to its promises and being recognised all over Europe.

Lena Adamson, Independent Expert on Higher Education Issues

Lena Adamson, Independent Expert on Higher Education Issues. I would like to give I think a very simple answer as well from my point of view. I think the biggest problem we have in higher education quality is that there is still a lot of passive teacher driven teaching and learning going on. The learning outcome paradigm is, of course, based on active learning, students shouldn’t just know things; they should be able to do something with it as well. So I think the most quality driving thing here is, of course, to have the qualifications frameworks that are based on learning outcomes, quality assurance mechanisms that drives that, ensures that, that will be the most important quality driving thing, I think, moving from passive to active learning.

Sjur Bergen, Council of Europe

Thank you, Sjur Bergen, Council of Europe. I think from a European point of view one important function is that we have systems that allow us to be diverse and yet that make sense; so that we are both diverse and comparable. If we can’t succeed in that we will not really have a good European system.

The other point I think is that when we think about quality, look at the quality of institutions and schools but also of education systems. I think it is very important that our notion of quality also brings in the notion of social inclusion. I cannot conceive of a good system, a high quality system that does not offer adequate opportunities for all learners. I mean that’s important for employment but it is also important for education to develop the kind of societies that we want, so it’s about employment but it is also very much about the kind of societies that we want and all that. Thank you.

Unidentified Speaker 1

This was not planned but, [inaudible] from the Council of Europe. Just two comments to reinforce what Jens mentioned about these questions: we will need to look on the pedagogical aspect, at what is really going on in the classroom. What has changed in the level of where it is really taking place, which is at the teaching and professorial level. This needs to be included in the reflection, because if we don’t we will continue to think about learning outcomes but not really knowing how, for a practitioner, how they’ll really be able to use them.

Second on this, and this is mostly for our political body to be in charge. This means also that it
will need to change the training of professors, because if in the training of professors and teachers this dimension is not promoted, then I don’t believe that they will learn it by accident. It needs to be included in the training process itself, and this will take a long time. Of course, the beneficiaries, meaning students but adults also, from a lifelong learning perspective and different stakeholders, can also mirror and give feedback from their point of view as to why it is important to enter into this logic of learning outcomes. I guess there is still a lot of information which is missing because people are not around the table.

\[85x777\]

Unidentified Speaker 2

I come from the Lithuanian Ministry of Education and Science. In fact I will be echoing the last speaker’s words but in my own words. Yes, when we’ve been speaking - and we are speaking all the time about learning outcomes - we are kind of repeating them as a buzz-word, but what’s behind that concept? To conceptualise what a learning outcome is: this has been done by educational research, by researchers of education, but still we as people engaged in policy making and administrators of education have to understand what is behind the concept of a learning outcome, that a learning outcome requires formulation, proper formulation and then its implementation. And implementation entails methods, methodology.

I have noticed in the discussions today, in my mind, some keywords: they were ‘shift’ and ‘paradigm shift’. So some radical change in something, and I think that paradigm shift should be implemented in currently prevailing academic cultures.

Another important keyword is ‘processes’. I am inclined to link processes with methods, because if you are speaking about learning processes we have to think about methods. Methods that allow us to implement learning outcomes and then again to assess and see into the issue whether the learning outcomes have been achieved. Again, how do you verify, how do you see into the matter?

With students a central issue, I think that there is an issue of the place of the teacher, of the professor. A possibly arrogant question arises in my mind, you have to ask yourself: is the teacher the most important actor in the process? He or she is, but don’t they have to step a bit back? Don’t they have to allow a bigger space for the student to open up, to express himself or herself? I don’t know. Because I can see from my son, students sometimes know more than parents and their teachers. In some areas, in some ways, they can express themselves. He’s the student. Of course he knows a lot but he doesn’t have experience but still. So that pedagogical issue I think is very central in this context. Thank you.

Dermot Coughlan, University of Limerick, Ireland

Dermot Coughlan, University of Limerick. I suppose the point that I want to put on the table is amongst all of the conversations that we’re having this morning, is to remember what we’re about. You know, again going back to the point that Bernie made about the centrality of the learner, we are about education and we are about training and we’re about learning. So therefore I would say, when we’re developing quality and qualifications frameworks that we realise that if we’re only doing it because we have to do it and because everybody else is doing it, then we have a serious problem.

Again going back to the point that one of the speakers from the Commission made, and I would reinforce this, one of the central planks that have to be there is the issue of training and development. Without training and development – because what you’re doing when you are introducing quality into an organisation such as a university, for instance, is that you’re looking for a massive cultural change. And without proper training and development of all the players, not just the teachers and the professors but also I’m talking about engaging with the students and engaging with the learner, that they must understand what we are talking about when we’re talking about learning outcomes and all of that.

So I think quite clearly what we must understand is that we’re not and we should not be about quality for quality’s sake, we’re about quality because we want to ensure that what we’re providing is a quality product.
Thank you, I'm Fernando Galán from the European Students' Union, I come from Spain. My question is also regarding actually the term 'learning outcome'. We are talking about the students, and 'learning outcomes', otherwise we would be talking about 'teaching outcomes'. Since I really wanted to talk about the learning outcomes this concept leads automatically to the students and to learning approach, and when we are talking about that it's also like at the very beginning of the year the teachers still deal with the student in terms of: 'these are the goals that we are setting up for this course for this year, you should be able to achieve these goals, and the teachers will be a guide in this process'. It's not enough to have a single set of teaching and assessment methods leading to one set of learning outcomes. You need different paths because there is a diverse body of learners and students. We don't have a twenty-year-old student body anymore and we also have more part-time students in the universities.

We have to have this approach to the diverse group that we have. My question is: who shall lead to this interpretation of the learning outcomes? Who actually has the power to do it?

I mean those responsible should be the higher education institutions because we cannot expect from the national government or from the external QA bodies to go down to the classroom and implement the learning outcomes. They still help, of course, and they still facilitate this process, but together with the students and the teachers, the institutions should be responsible.

Okay, thank you. With that I am going to call this session to a close. Can I thank our panellists for their contributions and yourselves for your own engagement both in the table sessions and in our open floor discussion.
Some key points from discussion

- We need to focus on the citizen and the learner, and on the common purpose of the work: we need flexible learning pathways
- There are common issues- mutual trust in qualifications, the professional development of teachers and responsiveness to labour market news
- There is not a shared definition of learning outcomes between stakeholders within education and training, although a common understanding is growing
- A shared understanding has to be developed also with stakeholders including learners and employers so that qualifications are trusted
- Quality assurance processes need to address both inputs and outcomes as the defining features of qualifications frameworks, and the assessment as practiced, according to the outcomes and standards of competent bodies
- There is agreement that the value of qualifications is dependent upon transparent quality assurance processes
- A balanced focus on QA will address both the achievement of learning outcomes and their fitness for purpose. This will enhance the education and training process
- The growth in inclusion of non-formal and informal learning within qualifications frameworks signals a shift away from focussing on the process of achievement of learning outcomes to their assessment
- Teachers and learners need to use the language of learning outcomes
- There needs to be a longitudinal evaluation of the impact of the learning outcomes approach
- Learning outcomes are:
  - At the heart of formal, non-formal and informal learning, and are divided by a common language
  - Most effective when their development is quality assured and integrated with assessment and certification
  - Best when all stakeholders participate in their development within a quality assured context
  - Supported best by a balance of focus between inputs and outcomes
Chapter 5

Session 3.1: Using quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to promote the labour market relevance of qualifications

Pat Leahy

Good afternoon, ladies and gentlemen, if I could ask you to take your seats in preparation for our next session. Our afternoon session is two sessions shoehorned together.

Our next session is focusing on the crucially important area of jobs and employment and how quality assurance and qualifications frameworks translate to the labour market. Our panel is one person down, Isabelle le Mouillour has been delayed travelling from Germany. We are lucky to have a great panel notwithstanding her absence. Mike Coles is the wearer of many hats and is an expert on qualification systems from both sides of the fence; Kevin Marshall is from Microsoft; and Thomas Mayr is from the European Association of Small Craft and Medium-size Enterprises.

The European Council last December called on the Council and the Member States and the Commission to ensure rapid follow up to its communication on Rethinking Education. The Council stressed the importance attached to skills, education, training and lifelong learning in enhancing employability and in particular tackling and preventing youth unemployment.

The challenge, of course, as we all know, is significant. Economic recovery has been slower than expected. Eurostat predicts that peak unemployment of 11% in Europe with 60% unemployment levels among lower skilled workers. Youth unemployment in Europe is now at an average rate of 23%, almost a quarter, and increasing to over 50% in several Member States.

Now, at the same time there is growing evidence across Europe that the skill supply is not meeting the needs of the labour market and again that’s something that we hear in this country quite a bit, there is currently over two million vacancies across Europe that are currently unfilled.

To discuss this and how the work that you are all engaged in can more easily translate into tackling the unemployment problem: I turn to our panel. Mike, I might turn to you first. You have long experience in industry and you have expertise in qualification systems, maybe you might start by telling us what concrete ways that qualifications frameworks can improve the quality of vocational qualifications and their relevance to the labour market.

Mr Mike Coles,
Qualifications Systems Expert

Note: Unfortunately due to travel difficulties, Isabelle Le Mouillour could not attend the conference. Mike Coles kindly agreed to take her place on the panel.

The first point I would like to make is a caveat that unemployment and all the problems of skills mismatches and skill shortages, these go beyond the realms of qualifications frameworks. Too much is expected of qualifications and qualification frameworks. Countries and businesses in countries need to do other things than just look at quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to solve these problems.

The question specifically points to frameworks and quality assurance. So my second caveat would be that these need to be considered separately because in some countries qualification frameworks automatically and unquestionably embed the quality assurance arrangements for the qualification system. In many others they don’t. The framework stands alone and kind of encourages these quality assurance processes to work together but most often the quality assurance processes are embedded in the sector for which they were designed. So they’re in higher education or they’re in the labour market qualifications,
they may be in big companies, in awarding organisations, in providers, and it’s those quality assurance elements which are combined.

From this morning I sometimes got the impression that frameworks and quality assurance were always together, and they’re not always together. Some of the most successful qualifications frameworks use quality assurance processes which belong to other parts of the systems.

I think it is true to say that qualifications frameworks, generally, across the world have led to improvements in quality, specifically in VET qualifications. I can’t go further than that. The quality of VET provision has improved and it is possible to link it to a qualifications framework development. I think this is true first of all because of the very simplest thing, the thing which even people in this room who are experts in frameworks will sometimes miss: qualifications frameworks are simple classifications, they just provide this most simple classification of levels, level descriptors, levels of learning that people can use when they talk to each other.

Everything else follows from this. So by trying to bring qualifications from the labour market into that framework, it automatically engages a new range of stakeholders in discussions about levels and quality and equivalents and so on and so forth. That sort of organising, classification, codification function of frameworks is extremely important. There are countries in the world where a framework has been introduced with the sole purpose, when it boils down to it, to organise VET, because VET is a far more complicated world than the world of higher education. Some countries find it difficult to work with VET to improve quality because it’s so disorganised. “Disorganisation” is not meant to pejorative, it’s because in these countries VET is kind of evolved to meet needs. It has evolved in sectors in different ways, in institutions in different ways and it just is different in these different settings. If you have anything which gives some order to it, it’s an asset. So that’s the first and major point on the way they can work together.

The second point; and I’m not going to say much on this because it was dealt with very well before lunch; the use of learning outcomes, and if they have important parts to play in the framework and in the quality assurance system. From this particular question about the concrete way in which qualifications frameworks and QA can improve VET, if you express things in terms of learning outcomes, of course you will see the strength and the coordination but you will also see the weaknesses and where things don’t match up and where there’s synergy lost in the system. So by classifying and using learning outcomes you bring extra concrete value there.

The biggest area is every country has a chance to say: “our framework will be regulatory. We will make something which tries to bring together quality standards in our qualifications system.” In some countries they impose a system where a VET qualification exits, it’s to be accredited into a new framework and there are criteria which govern its admission into the framework. For example, the criteria might say: what is the status of the awarding organisation? Is it competent? Does it know its market? Does it have the support of its stakeholders? Do the big businesses support it? So this is an important sort of criterion. Then, of course, it might also say: does it have any track record in the business? Does it actually produce graduates which are needed? Are any of the graduates from this VET qualification left unemployed? Do employers seek this qualification in terms of their advertising for posts? You find lots of things like this to do with market research, for example, which the framework can insist on before a qualification is admitted. In some countries, after the qualification is admitted, its track record is also tested. So what are the statistics to do with the jobs that graduates get from this qualification? Do they stay in these jobs for very long? Are they proving themselves to be competent? If they drop out, why do they drop out? Where have they come from? What qualification did they have when they took this job which has been embedded in the framework and where did they go after that? And so on and so forth. There are lots of post accreditation checks which frameworks can impose.

Those are concrete things about how quality assurances processes and qualifications frameworks actually can lead to proven gains in quality and relevance of VET qualifications.
Pat Leahy
Thanks, Mike, some points we might come back to over the course of the session. Let me turn to Kevin Marshall from Microsoft. Working in a multinational organisation, you’ve operations in many different countries, all of which presumably have their own education and training systems, so what’s the relevance for you in these developments in qualifications frameworks and quality assurance in a global company like Microsoft?

Kevin Marshall, Head of Education at Microsoft Ireland
I just want to say one thing first; I want to complement Jim Murray on his paper, it was part of my homework for this session, it’s a fine paper and I would encourage you all to take some time to think about it. There’s a quote here from George Bernard Shaw, who is one of our famous playwrights and I will read it because I think it just sums up the morning, for me anyway:

“Every serious student of the subject knows that the stability of a civilisation depends finally on the wisdom with which it distributes its wealth and allots its burdens of labour, and on the veracity of the instruction it provides for its children.”

I think there’s a lot in that, on a couple of levels, that we could talk about: the notion of what it provides for our children, and I think that for me is one of the key points of this morning, that there’s a lot of language and some from the outside of this qualifications and policy making area can be quite confusing. I embarked on this journey with HETAC a number of years ago, because as a global organisation we have a lot of very good industry relevant certifications. We think they’re relevant, other people may not necessarily think they’re relevant.

My view is that we began a way of looking at establishing where our qualifications and certifications fit on a national framework that would give us more relevance in a policy debate about education reform, transformation, which is on-going in this country, particularly in the last number of years, and is on-going across Europe and is particularly relevant to the notion of the skills gap.

How do you know these qualifications are worth anything? If they sit on a particular framework, that says something, What that says we can debate about, but I think the process of going through that accreditation, the process of getting one’s qualifications put through quality assurance is very challenging but worthwhile. The question I always ask is, “is this worth doing?” Having done it, it is absolutely well worth doing and I would do it again, and actually we are doing it again on a different level.

But don’t underestimate the amount of effort it takes to actually go through that process, it’s like a self-examination or introspection really, you actually have to test does your stuff stand up. Just because we think it does, that’s fine, but does anyone else think it’s relevant? And I think there’s a much wider debate that we saw last week with the coalition and the skills issue and all the four Commissioners talking about, you know, what this means.

Having frameworks, having qualifications, having pathways through all this stuff is critical for learners, because the world is changing at such a pace, a breath-taking pace, particularly in the world of technology, that we need to be able to map some pathway for the learners.

Pat Leahy
Thanks, Kevin. Let me turn to Thomas, if I can.

One of the points you made in your response to the Conference paper on this theme was the importance of indicators and statistical data to support better linkages between the world of education and training and the world of work. You also highlighted, I think, the need to evaluate the effectiveness of that linkage between the two. Would you talk to us a little bit about that, please?

Thomas Mayr, UEAPME Representative on the EQF Advisory Group
I will come to this question, but first I would like to follow up a little bit of what Mike has said because I think it is very important. This is the way I look at the European and the national qualifications frameworks and on quality assurance: that qualifications frameworks
are not an objective themselves and quality assurance a means to achieve this objective, but actually it’s the other way around. We are looking at an instrument, the qualifications frameworks, and the role quality assurance can play in this context is to reach the overall objectives. The overall objective especially in training but also to a lesser degree probably also for education and, higher education; must be to be relevant and to be responsive, relevant to labour market needs, responsive to changes on the labour market.

I believe that the instrument, qualifications frameworks and the European Qualifications Framework recommendation conceptually can be of great value here.

I would not say we are there yet. I see the potential of these instruments, of course some countries are more progressed than others in implementing these instruments, but I would see great potential in these instruments to contribute to this goal of reaching overall responsiveness and to have relevance. In the instruments themselves this issue of employability, this issue of labour market relevance is embedded, we have the descriptors where there is one sentence at every level always referring to the work context or the study context. We have the columns, of course: we have knowledge; we have the skills; and then we have this competence column in terms of autonomy and responsibility, if I remember it correctly. The third column especially has a lot to do with labour market relevance. There are descriptions on it like ‘supervising the routine work of others’ and things which in a work context - and I am not saying this applies to all qualifications - but at least in the work context and especially for VET qualifications can be highly relevant.

Now I am trying to come back to your question. Where countries need to be extremely careful is not to be self-referential with their qualifications frameworks. This I am saying, of course, from an employer perspective. It is really not enough to look at the level descriptors and compare these level descriptors to the qualification descriptors and, in a linguistic comparison, say “yeah, they fit and this qualification is put at level 4, at level 5” or whatever. Rather it is necessary to reach out and to look for clues and to look for indicators, look for references outside the education world. Here, of course, I am coming back to the question, statistics on labour market entry, for instance, on performances et cetera come into play.

I have been, some of you probably remember, knocking at this door for some time now, saying that, if descriptors have these references to the labour market, to the work context, then in the referencing documents of individual countries through the European Qualification Frameworks, countries should provide proof, well, not proof but indicators that they are really reaching this with their qualifications.

70% of graduates typically enter a job at this and this level. Maybe I am just reconsidering and maybe I’ve been actually knocking at the wrong door, maybe it should have not been the EQF or NQF door that I have knocked at, maybe it would rather be the quality assurance door would be the right one to knock with this question.

Here again I can only refer to the EQF recommendation where countries are proposed to use labour market indicators such as: what type of profession a young person or a not so young person after completing a certain type of training enters into? What kind of job performance do they have? I know, of course, countries are different and such statistics are not to hand, if they are not easy to hand I mean you can also do it with employer studies; ask employers, are we really living up to the descriptions of our learning outcomes, of intended learning outcomes? Is it just paper? Do we just write something on paper or is it really reality that these qualifications can live up to their expectations?

Again, I believe that both instruments can provide great value added in this context. And again, and I come to the beginning on intervention, I don’t think it is enough to stop at the question ‘how do we use quality assurance for qualifications frameworks?’ The question should actually be ‘What do we want to achieve with both - quality assurance and the qualifications frameworks?’ This has in my eyes, of course, a lot to do with responsiveness and relevance. Maybe there are other ways of achieving relevance.
General panel discussion

Mr Leahy

Mike, would you like to come back on any of those points there that Thomas was making?

Mr Coles

No. I think they complement mine pretty well, because it is a complicated field when you're trying to be responsive at local level or regional level and build the qualifications which are actually needed in a region. It's always going to be bedevilled by complexity, VET. It's never going to be anything else, and frameworks can help but they are not the solution to the problem. There are other things to do with standards devised for occupations and so on. What big businesses set as their standards, those are the things which are going to be the key to responsiveness, and make people employable.

Mr Leahy

Kevin, you've had direct experience of quality assurance processes associated with the evaluation of programmes of education and training, what did you learn from that experience about the connections between education and training in the world of work?

Mr Marshall

Well I suppose the first thing actually from my own personal perspective was actually to understand frameworks. At least in the Irish context of what they actually mean, because people normally don't. It's not relevant to the work that I'm doing, in a work context. It's only when you delve into it and ask: well actually, what does it mean? why is it so important? that it becomes much more relevant and you begin to think about it.

The second thing was rigor, I mean the process was a rigorous process. We had to answer very detailed questions about a whole range of areas pertaining to certification across different levels, because we had a number of certifications that we were looking at at the time. I think there's about five or six that we put on the framework. I think that process clarified some of the issues pertaining to our quality assurance but also it made us ask: well why did we want this? Why is it so important? Or do I think this is so important to the business and what are we actually saying about these certifications and in a language that the framework body could understand so that we were at least looking at the same direction about what was important.

The first time we didn't get through the panel evaluation so we had to go back and do it again. In the clarification of the questions that emerged from the first review, it made it easier the second time around because we were clearer about what this was about and how we could actually position it. Where there was an issue, for example, around external examining, that those are okay but that's not necessarily true from the quality assurance on the industry side. So asking how do you actually come up with a solution that deals with that? So I think that was well worth doing.

I think the broader picture is the stuff that we're trying to do in Europe, because we mapped Ireland onto EQF, which just has a much broader discussion. Going in talking to the Commission about this, I have a good idea having gone through it, of where I think this is relevant, where I think this is relevant not only for Ireland and Europe but Europe within the greater context of the world. This is one of the key points in the final theme in Jim's paper, is this notion of competitiveness.

I think the challenge I see now is that, with the EQF, with national frameworks, then the ECF (which is a competency tool for ICT) and you have SOFIA in the UK. We have all these really good tools, but it's all a mishmash and I think it's how do we kind of pull that together that it is a kind of coherent policy and pathway that makes sense for a learner.

Mr Leahy

Presumably you'll want to see an employer input into that?
Mr Marshall

Oh, absolutely. I mean we have responsibility as employers to adopt these initiatives. I'm not saying it’s all about the qualifications side of things. I think that the challenges we face, that we’re not embedding some of the stuff that's there. Part of it is that we don’t know that it is there. There's a communication issue around the relevance of this. It's only when the notion that there's such a skills gap that things become – people become more focused about it and say: ‘actually, these things are quite good’. Is it a communication, is it a dissemination issue? Business responds to particular needs at particular times, and sometimes this is not relevant and sometimes it is.

So it’s a challenge, it’s a challenge to get right, but there are good initiatives out there and there's a policy gap on both sides that I think could be bridged.

Mr Leahy

That's interesting because it brings us on to something that Thomas, you had in your response as well. You spoke about the requirement for governance structures that foster co-ownership and shared responsibility for delivering sort of demand-led qualifications. Do you have examples of that or do you want to talk about that a little bit?

Mr Mayr

Unfortunately, Isabelle is not here. A perfect example, of course, would have been Germany and especially the work based learning approach they have, in Germany, Austria and in Switzerland and some other countries where social partners, chambers, professional organisations play an incredibly important role not only in the policy making but actually also in the policy implementation and actually even in the administration of the system. Where the content of qualifications are negotiated between players, employers and trade unions, where the concrete administration of the apprenticeship training system is not done by a ministry or by some State body but by the local chambers.

So here you have a good example where there's actually – where the State has delegated authority to players in the world of work, to put it in very general terms. I think that such governance structures, where there is a sense of co-ownership by players from the world of work are very, very conducive to this objective of responsiveness and relevance, because of course, I mean this is where the qualifications are needed and this is the place where the qualifications are designed.

Maybe, and of course, I am very well aware that countries are incredibly different in this context and that it is incredibly difficult even in some countries, as Jim pointed out in his paper and in his speech this morning, to include social partners; to include employers and trade unions, in this case. Maybe the qualification framework in this context can be an instrument to include and to involve social partners, to assume this co-ownership. This is actually the most important thing in this context; we have this ingredient, this basic ingredient of qualifications frameworks and then we have the learning outcomes, which make things incredibly clear in many aspects to describe what we expect, what are the intended learning outcomes of our qualification. Maybe by designing qualifications according to this new principle, according to this new way of doing things, makes it easier to include and to involve employers and trade unions and other professional bodies.

But I really don't see how it is possible to have well-functioning VET systems, especially if you want to include some work based elements without having in place intermediate bodies. This is something really I believe very strongly, it is impossible, really impossible to steer companies as training providers in the same way as you can steer vocational schools. You cannot steer companies by decrees coming from a ministry. What you need here in place is intermediate bodies, be they professional bodies or be they whatever. These intermediate bodies, of course, have to have certain responsibilities and have to have certain competences in a country.

This is actually a question outside the qualifications frameworks debate but still maybe and in some countries it might work. The qualification framework can be used to actually
implement and foster and develop such a culture of co-ownership by different players.

*Mr Leahy*

To come back to Mike and Kevin, there is an issue that people on the qualification side must make an effort, and vice versa, to speak to people on the employment side because they don’t always speak the same language maybe.

*Mr Coles*

That’s probably true, isn’t it, Kevin?

Qualifications are just meaningful packages of learning outcomes and skills and competencies, and they are kind of aggregations of the whole system. When you become qualified as a craftsman in plumbing or air conditioning; it’s what is regarded by the business as being a reasonable set of expectations which are going to have value in the labour market. But in every application, in every place you go there will be different expectations on the ground; so the business that organises or prepares the controls for these will have a different set of expectations of people.

My view is that they have to engage the social partners, as Thomas is saying, but we also need them engaged not just to make sure that programmes are relevant, but we also need to make sure that the assessment of the learning outcomes is done appropriately. I would say that if there was one message for the longer term future, is that we’ve got to learn to – if you take the whole process of learning through to recognition as one – we’ve got to learn to learn in all sorts of different ways. Mostly though communities of practice after they have left formal education, they then need those learning outcomes assessed. They then have to be validated, and after the validation they are then certificated, and after certification they may or may not be recognised. We hope if we have engaged social partners then they will be recognised and given value in the labour market.

The key is the middle: validation. What we have to do, I think, is to find better ways of validating things by engaging our social partners and our businesses. They will show us the way that things need to be assessed and a way that they might be validated, and this is a key area of development. It’s not for a whole qualification, you can’t expect businesses to run the business of education and qualifications but they can help by refining the way learning outcomes are assessed and then validated, by making sure that the assessment methods and the validation process is fit for purpose, and that is a key concept, making this validation fit for purpose.

**Table discussion**

*Pat Leahy*

Thank you very much to our panel for that discussion. I invite you to return to your tables now, where no doubt you will take part in the next part of this session, which is a table discussion. We have got three questions that we want you to address.

The first question for discussion is:

**“Are the reforms envisaged in Rethinking Education, particularly in relation to the provision of the right skills for employability, sufficiently embedded conceptually in existing European qualifications and quality assurance policy or are further concepts and structures required?”**

The second question is:

**“What roles can national qualifications and quality assurance bodies play in coordinating engagement between labour market actors and education and training providers?”**

The third, and final, question for this session is:

**“How can the social partners contribute to the QA of education and training and the implementation of NQFs?”**
Question 1 table responses

Are the reforms envisaged in Rethinking Education, particularly in relation to the provision of the right skills for employability, sufficiently embedded conceptually in existing European qualifications and quality assurance policy or are further concepts and structures required?

There is a need to see what the qualifications framework is. A qualifications framework should not be required to do too many things; it is basically a tool to place qualifications. They should be used to enhance communication between the parties. If it becomes too fixed then a disservice will be done to the jobs market.

Qualifications frameworks do not necessarily enhance labour market relevance or employability.

The gate-keeping function of qualifications frameworks is still important and should be retained.

Qualifications frameworks and quality assurance can provide confidence to employers about the level of general skills and competences at a minimum level, but pathways to employability need to be built into programmes themselves.

Work based learning as a priority is very worthwhile.

Further structures are not required. Further concepts would be worthwhile

The centrality of the learner and role of teacher needs to be better articulated.

How to disseminate information in a system should be explored as part of reform.

At European level, we need an engagement with “multipliers” within National and Regional systems.

There is a need for contact between those who use learning outcomes and those who design them.

Reforms in Re-Thinking Education:

1. The document is too superficial. It hides important distinctions e.g. what is understood by skills and political choices.

2. There is a danger that there will be more fragmentation of skills with a need for multiple and costly assessments. We need to see qualification as a package where the sum is greater than the individual parts.

3. The question is rhetorical if we want to be more relevant, we must be specific.

4. Employers etc. must express their needs and expectations.

5. The language of qualifications is important to their transferability.

6. Frameworks can have transferable skills for those Interested in access to its qualifications as well as use of them.

The concept of the “right skills for employability” should be strengthened in the EQF and quality assurance policies, but not necessarily in the context of re thinking education which is very vague and general.

In relation to quality assurance we should think of Levels 1 – 4 first. There is an over-emphasis on higher education. This only deals with the existing problem and not long range planning.

In general yes. Where those linkages are not as strong, NQFs or the EFQ can be used to help develop it. If it is already in place it is more about communication.

The quick answer is no. New ways and approaches to validation and assessment of generic and transferable skills such as problem solving, communication etc. are needed.

Generic skills may be implicit but need to be made more explicit.

Key role is the development of the system of quality and NQF.

Role of technology & jobs should be investigated.

A common set of rules or legislation that governs the QA system and allows the social partners and stakeholders involved to fill in their rules themselves is needed. This would lead to broad ownership of QA and eventually leads to a sustainable QA system.

At macro and national level there are aspirations and concepts but there is a gap between the concepts and the implementation.
Yes, the concepts are there but validation is the key. Where the links between Social Partners are not good, NQFs should be used for implementation.

In theory yes, reforms in re-thinking education are sufficiently embedded but in reality there is not enough information and we’re working in a vacuum.

**Question 2 table responses**

What roles can national qualifications and quality assurance bodies play in coordinating engagement between labour market actors and education and training providers?

Quality assurance and accreditation bodies should manage the tension between educational providers and potential employers. Possibly through sandwich courses and internship arrangements.

**Role of quality assurance agencies:**

- Crucial to engagement with the labour market.
- Can play a lead role in directly working with labour market actors or working with Universities to ensure employers are involved.
- Can play an active role in quality assurance and assessment.
- Ensure ownership by social partners.
- Establish regional networks and partnerships with social partners.
- Survey national and regional social actors to identify qualifications needs.

Research funding and links with industry also improves relationship with education and industry sector.

At macro level you can have involvement but also it is needed at implementation level. For example in Switzerland professional organisations must be involved in developing qualifications. To implement this you need to convince employers that it is worthwhile.

In Norway, the social partners have responsibility for the learning outcomes of qualifications within their own field of learning.

We need to consider that if an awarding body adapts its quality assurance arrangements for programmes to be aligned to the NQF – this may not be a good thing.

Having labour market experts in review panels. A criterion for quality assurance activities to include them is useful.

The issues are different for VET and higher education. In VET it is suggested that because of diversity and scale, intermediaries should be used to engage employers. For example: Chambers of Commerce.

Look at the feedback loop between labour market and education and training. Recent CEDEFOP study shows:

a) Huge differences in priority given to this.

b) The need to continuously renew the relationship.

Actors cannot have full engagement in the hundreds of thousands of qualifications so market forces must also decide.

Shift the focus on learning outcomes to the needs of the work place. However, avoid the temporary needs of work placement. Focus on the long ranging transferable skills.

It can be difficult to get employers to engage in Internships /placements; it is also difficult for employers to engage with the language and process of frameworks.

Other roles of agencies would be to undertake ‘impact analyses’ in conjunction with employers.

Establish communities of practice; is this limited to a role of monitoring effectiveness of quality assurance only?

Qualifications and quality assurance agencies can play a role in performing research, measuring, evaluating, using indicators and real outcomes.

Deeper analysis is required of employment opportunities in terms of skills to address mismatches.
Encourage the delivery of transversal skills, language skills, entrepreneurship – need to assess and report on these.

How are we going to keep lecturers up to date with practice moving on in business?

Need to move to authentic, realistic assessment.

They should achieve a balance between labour market needs and realistic implementation at the educational level.

Agencies can help find a balance. Not too focussed on labour market but also educationally focussed. Not as a goal but as a process.

Quality assurance and qualifications can provide a common framework for discussion.

NQFs should ensure that employers are part of the validation process. We're not sure that the needs of the employer can be met. What do employers want? How do NQFs engage with them?

We should examine the processes through which one must go through to interrogate what is needed. Can they ensure employers are included in consultation?

**Question 3 table responses**

*How can the social partners contribute to the QA of education and training and the implementation of NQFs?*

Why should they (social partners) contribute to the implementation of the qualifications frameworks? Perhaps the Social Partners are more in touch with the sector.

There should be programme accreditation panel membership.

It's not just about social partners, others are equally important: the public sector, volunteering sector.

Investing time and realising a person will be effective from day one. We are reading too much into the needs of the workplace.

Employers need to see the benefit in engaging and are more likely to engage if they're feeling a skills deficit in their own sector.

Social partners need to be involved in development and monitoring of NQFs and QA, to contribute to these broader social and economic objectives and employability outcomes.

Need to build commitment and trust. “Buy-in” is needed to include social partners from the outset who share ownership.

It is important to engage employers. When they need to engage (e.g. Microsoft), the employers then have “ownership” of the system (not just one of many stakeholders). Once they take responsibility the payback is relevant quality and responsive qualifications.

Social Partners need to be more involved in validation and assessment. Employers provide a reality check.

At lower levels, all employers want is a narrow set of skills.

Employers can tell you what they want, and look at the learning environment in the company.

We don't think employers have the solution or providers alone – the answer is in the mix. One should not dominate the other. It’s about involving the social partners.

Employers – not social partners? This is very country specific. In order for this to be facilitated social partners need the capacity to articulate their needs.

Create structures to facilitate voice of other sectors being heard in the discussions. We need to include Civil Society as well as labour market actors.

In some countries social partners are not so strong, trade unions even less so.

**Additional table comments**

Social partners have their roles in developing qualifications but also in implementing them. Trade unions should be involved in professional continuous teacher training; employers should be then involved in providing work based learning for students.
Note that there is scope in open frameworks to include company training. This is an emerging area of interest in many countries. It can challenge a framework to be flexible and to adapt.

Employers do not express what they need for competiveness reasons.

Qualifications have wider objectives than simply to ensure employability.

There is tension between what the needs of the economy and education are.

Reconsider the approach to the sides to this contribution – thinking about how the skills can be used in market (employers) instead of telling QA what the actual skill are.

4.7 Plenary discussion

Pat Leahy

Okay, ladies and gentlemen, we want to move on to the floor debate part of this session.

Again, much to discuss from this session from the contributions that we have already heard from our panel, and if you have questions that you want to put to any of the members of the panel arising from their contributions or their written responses, we are happy to accommodate that. They can answer from their tables.

Let me start by wondering, arising from some of the contributions we have heard here, it was suggested that the sort of quality assured learning outcomes based qualifications provide a sort of common language or a bridge. Thomas talked about shared ownerships between the world of work and the world of education and training. I would be interested in getting people’s thoughts on that. I wonder too do employers sometimes expect too much? You know, from the graduates that they are presented with, from the structures on the educational side, or are they entitled, are employers entitled, I wonder, to stipulate what they want from the education system and how it should be judged?

I wonder how you assess this paradigm shift that we heard of, a paradigm shift towards learning outcomes in terms of its contribution or its potential contribution to a more responsive qualifications system. So on some of the ideas that we heard, I’d be interested in hearing responses.

Diarmuid Hegarty, President, Griffith College Dublin

Diarmuid Hegarty is my name. I have to say I find myself increasingly frustrated at this conference, having read the Re-Thinking Education document, completely the wrong questions are being asked of us today. I think that the medical equivalent of this conference is actually curing people of cancer rather than in fact teaching them originally not to smoke.

If you look at the figures, the figures which Re-Thinking Education presents: it says 20% of 15 year olds lack basic skills. That’s what it’s saying, basic skills in reading and mathematics. It is also saying to us, and we said earlier that we have unfilled vacancies of two million. So, this process – and it’s important that it be done, that frameworks should adjust learning outcomes to make them more relevant to the labour market, that is going to deal with 10% of the problem. It isn't actually going to fill those two million jobs.

The major quality problem quite clearly coming out in this document is not at third level, it’s actually at first and second level. It’s the 20% of 15 year olds. Ask Kevin Marshall how many of those unemployable 15 year olds do Microsoft employ. Try and think ahead to this problem, because the paper also tells us that the numbers involved in low skilled, or the numbers who will be employed in low skilled jobs will reduce from 20% down to 18% by 2020. Extend that to 2030, and if you do a linear extension, and I’m not necessarily saying the relationship is linear, I don’t know; but if it is linear that 18% goes down to 12%. So if we do nothing about the 20% of
15 year olds who lack basic mathematical and reading skills, are we going to have a situation in 2030, when 20% will be unemployable or will be fit to take jobs that only 12% of Europe’s population can take?

That, to my mind, is the fundamental question. We are not asking about the quality problem where it really lies, and it lies, quite clearly from the statistics given at school level. Also look at the language statistics as well, 9% of people in England have a second language when leaving school. Compared to - I don’t have the statistics but I’m pretty sure for Scandinavia and the Netherlands it will be very much higher.

We clearly have a problem with first and second level. Why in actual fact are we not focusing – and we seem to regard the framework, we seem to regard the European framework as existing only from levels 5 to 8, that’s the framework affecting third level. Levels 1 to 4 of the framework seem to be completely ignored and that’s where 90% of the problem lies. Why are governments not concerned? Why are governments not looking at quality assurance in first and second level? It is because of the perception: ‘well, you know, third level is actually outside our control, third level is run by independent institutions and we need quality assurance associations in order to assure quality.’ The real problem and the real wakeup is they need quality assurance in first and second level. And bear in mind these are highly controlled by governments, and the service delivered in most countries by unionised workers.

This is clearly where the problem lies and, in fact, that I submit is a fact. If you’re focusing on quality assurance, we should be asking questions about quality assurance in first and second level.

Unidentified Speaker 1

Indeed we need quality assurance for the first three levels, we fully agree. It’s just what we are working about within EQF and learning outcome approach is helping us because it’s looking to achievement. Literacy, for example, we should not allow that young people leave school without, let’s say a significant level of literacy and without EQF level 3, and that’s quite possible with the combination of frameworks and quality assurance and a learning outcome approach, focusing on achieved learning outcomes. I fully agree that there is a lot of work to be done there, but we have the tools, we have the arrangements to do it.

Pat Leahy

Any further contributions on that subject?

Márcio Barcelos, European Youth Forum

Hello, I’m Márcio from the European Youth Forum. I am going back to your original question about whether the labour market can be entitled to have so much influence on deciding on the education systems’ outcomes. I think it is risky to focus so much on the labour market. I think it is a current problem, and I come from Portugal and so I know exactly what the problem is. We are looking for a solution for our problem, which is not necessarily a sustainable model of society for what we should have as a working society and as a satisfied society in general for young people and for the next generations. So that’s my opinion on it.

John Scattergood, Trinity College Dublin

I'm John Scattergood from Trinity College. I think we're in danger, particularly in meetings like this where there is a general consensus about the value of what we're debating. I think there's a danger that we may be asking too much of higher education qualifications. I don't think we're in a situation where educational qualifications, even though attained at a good level, can get you through life.

I think what educational qualifications can do is to give you a good start. I mean most of one's life will be spent in the workplace and most of one's knowledge will be work-based knowledge. I think what we have to try to come to terms with is that educational providers don't provide everything, they provide something, they provide a start.

I think we need to put in place a system whereby people go out from universities or wherever into the workplace, acquire more knowledge and then maybe come back into the university, bring that knowledge and enhance that knowledge
and then go out again. People may do this two or three times in a life of work. I think in a way universities have got things wrong at postgraduate level. I think there are too many long courses at postgraduate level. I think what people need from universities is a good, basic degree with knowledge skills and competences and then from time to time come back into the universities, bring in the knowledge they’ve got, doing maybe one year diplomas, quick-ish diplomas, retaining, going back out into the workforce and so on.

I think the concentration on long courses, masters degrees, doctorates, it’s all very well if you’re providing for a broad and a deep knowledge base in universities, but most of the provision is not of that sort, most of the provision in society is not of that sort. I think there has to be a real rethink at postgraduate level.

Pat Leahy

Okay, thanks. One of the things that arises, is the number of countries including or planning to include sort of sectoral or international awards generated from private companies within their national qualifications frameworks, and they’re not, in most cases, considered part of the formal or the national educational training systems. I wonder do people think qualifications frameworks should open up to these type of essentially private qualifications and what quality assurance issues might arise from them. Does anyone have any thoughts on that?

Joan Gormley, OfQual

Hi, I’m Joan Gormley from Ofqual. I suppose what I want to say is not so much about whether I think they should but the fact that actually we’ve tried that, certainly in England, where government initiatives very much pushed employers and the big employers - FlyB, one of the big railway bodies; McDonalds, The Burger Place, were very actively encouraged to engage as provider bodies in the qualification system, and to become, in our world, we call them recognised awarding organisations.

I think the government target at one stage had been that 100 such companies would engage within the formal and regulated qualification system, and indeed, several of them did step up to the plate and did attempt to go through, as our friend from Microsoft referred to, the rather rigorous process of becoming a body, approved as a competent body to award learners who have qualifications.

I think the general sense and experience from those bodies was that employers are employers, they’re not education institutions nor are they awarding organisations. Whilst they might want to participate very much in the thinking and the policy and the development around what kind of measures we put in place to make sure that people have the skills which they in turn use. Qualifications are the proxies of skills, so, you know, we have to remember that in that world we still have to allow for the fact that for employers qualifications are an easy way to measure the skills acquisitions for the workforce. I think certainly in terms of engaging them much more in the development of qualifications is very laudable, but I think it’s maybe perhaps just a touch too far to expect them to actually engage as awarding or delivery bodies in their own right.

Pat Leahy
Some key points from session 3.1 discussion

- VET is much more complicated than higher education; qualifications frameworks organise it and make it transparent for ordinary citizens
- The use of the learning outcomes approach highlights the strengths of a VET system, but it also exposes areas for improvement: admission of an award to a qualifications framework can include criteria for testing its track record in the market
- The relevance of qualifications frameworks for employers is enhanced when qualifications are tested in an industry context and when clear learning pathways are articulated
- Where employers actively participate in a QA process it is useful for them, but it also helps to ensure that employers have a voice in the debate about the reform of education
- The placement of qualifications within frameworks needs to involve references and indicators from outside of the world of education to ensure that NQFs are not self-referential, and that qualifications are relevant and responsive
- Data gathered from institutions and employers are necessary for ensuring labour market relevance
- The standards set and used by large businesses are the keys to responsiveness for education and training
- Mutual understanding is built by the social partners working together, co-owning the processes and products
- Engagement builds competitiveness
- Professional bodies can bridge the gap between education and training and employment
Session 3.2: Quality assurance and qualifications as facilitators of the validation of non-formal and informal learning

Our final session for today is entitled “Quality assurance and qualifications as facilitators of the validation of non-formal and informal learning”. Our panel: Külli All is from the Ministry of Education and Research in Estonia; Patrick Werquin is a Qualifications Policy Expert from France; and Christine Wihak is from Thompson Rivers University in Canada. We will follow the same pattern as in the earlier sessions, we will have discussion between our panellists for about 30 minutes or so and then we will go over to you on the tables for your feedback and we’ll finish again with a floor discussion.

So, I will turn to our panel and maybe I’ll address this first question to both Külli and Patrick. What do you think is the capacity of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks to recognise diverse learning as such? Külli, if I could come to you first.

Külli All, Estonian Ministry of Education

Hello. I thought I would answer in the Nordic way: Limited. And that’s my answer.

Pat Leahy

Great. Thank you.

Patrick, let me throw that to you, are we trying to formalise informal education, as Külli says?

Patrick Werquin, Qualifications Policy Expert, France

Yes, limited capacity. I am worried that it’s our fourth session now and we are speaking about quality and about a qualifications framework and in some way we are looking up to the qualifications framework like a miracle, the remedy which should cure all the diseases of the educational system. Of course, we all know, and we acknowledge that education systems are whatever they want. We know that the world of work is changing much more quickly than the educational systems can change. We know that we are speaking about the skills mismatches and we know that in the labour market there is a lot of valuable knowledge and valuable learning which we can pass into educational institutions and into the formal qualification system. At the same time I feel that we are trying to validate or assess informal and non-formal education with the means of formal education. In some ways we are trying to formalise informal education.

In the definition of qualification in the recommendation of the EQF, it says that we should look up learning outcomes. The results of the learning, and at the same times while we are looking on the guidance and notes, we are worrying about the procedures.

So, maybe we would not so much try to formalise or to describe all kind of learning but to try to accept this, that the learning area is very diverse and a very knowledgeable base, which we never can pass into the formal education and try to deal with learning outcomes and the recognition of the outcomes as they are.

Pat Leahy

Thank you.

Patrick, let me throw that to you, are we trying to formalise informal education, as Külli says?
a clear difference between the two. The issues paper sometimes mixes both concepts.

For me validation is the technical process. It's a group of experts saying, this has value, this needs to stand out or not, it leads to a qualification or not. Recognition is whether the society gives currency to whatever you have got. That's completely different because a group of officers may say, 'yes, this has value' but if the employers out there say 'no, I don't recognise that', this has no value, then there is no point. That's my first point.

The second point: the issues paper focuses on validation and recognition for the sake of getting a qualification or credits toward a qualification. That may not be the case. I can think of a lot of examples where people do it for self actualisation, for taking stock, for learning alone, before retiring or to get legitimacy with the grandchildren and to do the homework, you know. We have evidence from surveys, a lot of people are resuming learning because they want to teach the grandkids.

Okay, to respond to your question: quality assurance, yes. If we accept that the entire thing is about recognition, about getting a job, because it makes your competencies visible, then, yes, quality assurance is almost a necessary condition. It's not a sufficient condition, it's almost a necessary condition of the assessment process, because if you don't do good assessment then obviously the qualification will have no currency and we'll shoot ourselves in the foot.

I'm a lot more sceptical about the connection between qualification and validation or recognition. Obviously they have a lot in common: learning outcomes, visibility, mobility, transparency and all the words we get from the Commission. But a qualification framework is a classification device, you know, it deals with the outcome, the very end, last step, where validation is a process. Not only they are two different concepts but the actors are completely different. There is no such a thing as an international validation process where we have an international qualification framework. So things are completely different.

So I would say yes for quality assurance, we have to have quality assurance if we want the qualifications awarded after validation to be recognised. Qualifications frameworks; well, I understand it creates a conducive environment, you know, gives people a nice environment to work with, you know, to have some kind of benchmark, but I don't see a clear connection.

Pat Leahy

Thanks. Christine, is there an assumption that processes for valuing non-formal and informal learning can equally or consistently be equated within the processes for quality assurance and qualifications frameworks, do we need to differentiate non-formally acquired learning from formally acquired learning?

Christine Wihak, Thompson Rivers University, Canada

I want to start answering this question just by going back to original sources in a sense, because this equation of non-formal and informal learning is something that's been in European Community documents going back 10 or 15 years. Originally there was a distinction made between formal, non-formal and informal learning. So, just to make sure you're all on the same page: formal happens within the formal education system, non-formal happens outside of the education system, doesn't usually lead to certification and the motivation is intentional on the part of the learner. Informal learning is considered much more erratic, happening though daily activities, incidental, might be intentional, might not be intentional, it's a whole messy mass of learning.

I think when you start talking quality assurance, it makes sense to talk about it in terms of formal learning and non-formal learning, but it's really hard to talk about it in terms of informal learning because it's so diverse, so idiosyncratic. I actually like to think of it as wild knowledge, you know, it's just knowledge that goes in every different direction. I don't know how many of you are familiar with fractals and chaos theory, you know, you make a small change somewhere and the knowledge just goes completely in a different direction. The idea of trying to lasso that knowledge through quality assurance, it's formidable.
With non-formal learning, that’s much easier to bring into the quality assurance framework. It doesn’t take much, and you alluded to it too, to formalise non-formal learning. They are doing it in Ofqual, as we heard earlier, the American Council on Education for many years has offered a service called CREDIT, and they don’t have a qualifications framework but what they do is evaluate the learning from non-formal sources in terms of credits towards college diplomas and degrees. They make these recommendations and then those are incorporated into existing qualifications rather than creating separate qualifications. It’s maybe a little simpler to bring that under quality assurance because it’s the same quality assurance processes that you use already for the education and training providers, there’s no need to invent something new.

Getting back to the informal learning, since I work in that area and we’re always trying to assess it, within the community that does that work, we don’t agree yet on what represents quality. There’s huge debates that go on in that community that often when you try to formalise that informal learning you’re actually doing a huge disservice to the learner. Here we’ve heard that the learner is the focus. When you start to try to measure it and put it in boxes, you can be doing real trauma to somebody’s very important informal learning.

So, I don’t think that the quality assurance processes for the two types of learning will ever be the same and that if you try to make them the same it’s perpetuating that traumatisation of the informal learning.

Pat Leahy

You draw quite an important distinction between formal and informal learning – rather between informal learning and non-formal learning. Is that distinction always apparent, do you think?

Christine Wihak

Well, I think given the European Community’s definition it’s fairly apparent. Within the academic community to which I belong there’s lots of debate about that question and if anyone is interested I found the work that Helen Colley and her associates did at Leeds University on that topic really informative because it looks at all the different definitions. But the EC adopted a definition and that’s what I work with.

Note: Due to difficulties with travel arrangements, Mr. Feutrie was unable to attend the conference.

Panel discussion

Pat Leahy

Okay, Patrick, you were nodding or shaking your head vigorously there.

Patrick Werquin

Well, yeah, two things: I think outside of this room nobody has a clue about the difference between non-formal and informal learning. So working at the OECD I started to try to put on paper definitions. It’s useful for us but basically for laypeople it doesn’t make sense. What matters is whether things are certified, you know, and there is a piece of paper saying people can do this and this or know this and this, and there’s all the big mass of skills knowledge and all the competencies that people have, and that’s what we should document.

So, for the sake of the labour market and for the sake of the people, I don’t think we should spend too much time on definition, I think the borders are really, really fuzzy.

Christine Wihak

Well I agree that the borders are fuzzy but it’s just a lot easier given the definition of what they are using for non-formal learning in the EC to bring that into the qualifications framework and the certification because, you know, they have instructors, they have teachers, they have classrooms, they have curriculums, they have assessments, all of those aspects of formality that make a lot of training programmes offered by workplaces, McDonalds, is a good example. It’s very easy to recognise that within a qualifications framework. The other type of learning, and I agree that most people wouldn’t know that distinction, but they’d know, oh I took a
course at work on this topic, and if they could get credits, university credits or certification for that work, then they’re very happy.

But the informal learning that they do, you know, you mentioned recognition, I often refer that the first challenge of recognition is to get the learner to recognise it.

**Patrick Werquin**

True. But just one point: we all agree on formal, we all agree on informal but when you travel around the world, where you put non-formal varies a lot. You know, in some countries the entire adult learning sector is non-formal learning. So it’s a difficulty to get an agreement. I understand it’s important because there are money issues in the background, who is paying for what.

**Pat Leahy**

Külli, do you want to come in on that?

**Külli All**

It’s hard with the limits and with the definitions, I agree. For instance, you were saying about taking courses for this and this. If I took courses and got knowledge about how to be a plumber, why does it differ from the formal education, I have the qualification, what is the difference, formal and non-formal qualifications.

**Christine Wihak**

Well that’s what I’m saying! When it’s that close, when the non-formal and the formal are so similar it’s very easy to bring the non-formal in under the same umbrella, quality assurance certifications, it’s very clear.

**Pat Leahy**

Patrick, if we move on to a question about the EU level: what actions can be taken both nationally and at EU level to develop a validation of non-formal and informal learning?

**Patrick Werquin**

First of all let me make it very clear that most actors and stakeholders are hostile towards validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning outcomes, they don’t want it, you know, for different reasons. Academic people, we know very well why. Employers, trade unions are the best people, they are sometimes sceptical but they are good.

So there is this issue of trust, and we can do many things: we can really, and I mean really, draft curriculums in the formal learning sector as outcome based, and I am pretending ‘we’, because most people, when they talk about the curriculum they say: six hours of this, 10 hours of this, et cetera, they think input. The second thing is that people are worried because the input process is annoying. We have to communicate about what is it that matters about qualifications, and what matters is what people know or can do, and not where and when, with whom and how they learn, so we have to communicate about this. I think that’s where the Commission has a big role, you know, to communicate about this.

There are other things we should do. We should communicate about undeserved qualifications not being awarded to everybody. We really have to explain there is an assessment process, there is quality assurance et cetera. We should probably make the difference between regulated occupation qualifications and the rest clearer, but basically it’s not undeserved qualifications.

We have to produce smart statistics. When you look at statistics throughout Europe, people are confusing the ratio of people who completed the process with the people who started it. The ratio of success is about 99.5%, you know, where in the formal learning system the ratio is about 50%. What kind of system is this when you look at the statistics where everybody applying got the qualification? No, you have to do smart statistics, you start from the very beginning: who enters a validation centre and looks for information and checks whether he was eligible? A lot of countries have very smart eligibility conditions, we should produce real statistics to show that we do fail people, if you don’t deserve the qualification, you don’t get it.
We have to communicate about this because a lot of people accept the assessment system in the formal system and they don't accept the assessment system in the non-formal and informal system. But we have to explain to people that their dentist has become a dentist on average. He passed on average, right, he didn't do well in every single subject, he didn't even take every single subject. Maybe your dentist failed on pain control, you don't know. Well, eventually you know! Except maybe pilots, where I guess pilots are checked on every single situation, because you don't want a pilot that was assessed at random. I've never been through that, but all the rest are always assessed on average, you know, there are a lot of fields I have no clue about but I got a PhD.

So we have to communicate that it is okay when you assess a car mechanic, when we assess a plumber, that we – when you talk to professionals they tell you how many minutes they need to see whether the person is a real professional, and the number of minutes is three or four or five.

Külli, let me turn to you again. Are there specific areas of practice, do you think, that are better located at the national rather than the EU level, or should it all be an overarching framework?

I think that that is a question of international qualifications. I know we have in the EQF Advisory Group had several discussions about the international qualification being recognised automatically on the specific EQF level or should the right to assess them be left to the State level, national level, and, of course, the answer so far has been that every country wants to deal with this in their own way and retain the right to recognise or not recognise for themselves. But there is one thing I think, one example which makes us think about this. I think one of the international qualifications which almost everyone knows is the international welding qualification. A welding organisation is awarding the qualification in almost all the EU countries. Many countries have been asking what EQF level you will put to the qualification. I am saying it's the same qualification, the same level of learning outcomes.

As I remember, the answers ranged from second to fifth level. All these institutions were quality assured by the same organisation and all these countries were issuing the welding papers and welding certificates. Maybe this kind of international qualification should be agreed on the international EU level. If there are some more narrow qualifications than this, they should be left to the country to decide. Maybe it's a good point to start with inside the country and on the European level, on the international level to deal with international qualifications.

Christine, let me put a final question to you: You've made important distinctions, I suppose, between non-formal and informal learning, but does a focus on quality assurance qualifications frameworks take sufficient account of the motivations that people have seeking validation for those types of learning?

Well, I think Patrick alluded to this already, the question of motivation, in his answer to the first question. For people who are seeking learning for non-job related reasons, I think that the quality assurance processes that are required when certification or validation is being used for a job could be a barrier. Learning becomes too formalised, too intimidating for people to try to demonstrate their knowledge, when they might have quite a valid reason for wanting it. We've had many people do portfolios because they want to show their grandchildren. You know, there is a personal motivation for having your knowledge validated that's not always associated with trying to get a better job.

Having said that, we have also people who have come to do work, and there's research on this topic, they come because they want their learning validated for employment purposes and what they find is, they feel so validated at a deeply personal level it boosts their self confidence, it enhances their motivation to learn, they actually go on to learn more and so in that sense the quality assurance of having their...
learning validated for formal purposes actually is a boost to motivation and not one that they expected to find.

So, I think it’s a complex question and I think there are benefits and costs on either side of taking a quality assurance approach to it.

Table discussion

Pat Leahy

Okay. Well, with that I will conclude our panel part of this discussion. Again we put up some questions for the tables on the screen:

“Could the European level actors such as the EQF Advisory group, the BFUG working group, and European QA groups, identify, while making allowance for national specificities, the optimal approaches to documenting, identifying, assessing and certifying learning outcomes in validation? Or is this an unrealistic ambition?“

And secondly:

“Are national or centralised public quality assurance and qualifications bodies too closely-linked to the formal education and training systems, and does this diminish their capacity to operate validation systems in a sufficiently flexible manner?“

Question 1 table responses

Could the European level actors such as the EQF Advisory group, the BFUG working group, and European QA groups, identify, while making allowance for national specificities, the optimal approaches to documenting, identifying, assessing and certifying learning outcomes in validation? Or is this an unrealistic ambition?

Experience of quality assurance in the development and implementation of validation processes could be usefully shared between European partners.

It is unrealistic and not advisable: different countries and institutions have different objectives (political, economic, social etc.). This calls for local initiatives not a central European structure.

The council recommendation is a good way for two actors to work together to achieve progress.

Clarification: the recommendation includes the principle that when validating non-formal and informal learning, there should be a reference to the formal qualification system. This is a stronger basis than that mentioned in the question.

There is already guidance from EQF on recognising non-formal and informal learning.

‘Optimal’ is overstating it, but bodies could share practice.

The willingness of individuals, employers or states to pay depends on perceived value or purpose of the process.

Could we create more frameworks like the CEFR which could address fields of learning?

May not be advantageous to link everything to the framework, e.g. could lose industry brand (it is useful however to compare standards).

They can provide good practice and encourage more work on this but it is extremely costly and the members are so diverse that an optimal solution is not visible at this stage.

In some countries, e.g. Austria, this question does not apply because there are no centralised public bodies.

It may not be realistic because it is very difficult. It is so hard to categorise motivation levels towards a qualification for individual learners or providers in the non-formal / informal learning field.

These agencies can create the condition for other people (experts, practitioners etc.) to do this.

Are CEDEFOP guidelines not already doing this?

Most non-formal and informal learning is so particular and often based on local circumstances that it is hard to imagine how international bodies could adequately assess it.

Bodies are already doing this. They should identify and share practice and approaches and common principles.
An optimal approach is not realistic.

There are different realities in different countries: impacts on recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

Terminology and definitional difficulties present difficulties across sectors and countries, these need to be overcome before further developing EU Guidelines.

It would be useful to have a set of guidelines but its implementation into the national systems is important and difficult.

Guidelines could be provided but what is the purpose? Cultural issues are so different. So it’s not unrealistic but the aim requires explanation. If the EU wants to ‘harmonise’ systems, there are pros and cons of doing this. Mobility is good, but local specificities are important. What is a flexible manner?

European Guidance and national action is an unrealistic ambition, yes. There are no European qualifications – only national ones.

If learning outcomes are in place then RPL is easier.

QA bodies are by necessity linked to the formal qualifications system. There would be huge resistance to recognising learning from outside (competition, negatively impacting on what they are doing). Some countries - e.g. France do it very well. Why not others? Perhaps due to cultural barriers. Closed academic communities? Guarding territory?

Is it necessary? No further specification is required. Broad framework and guidelines are required and do exist. Implementation should be left for each individual nation. Norway has clear validation guidelines for non-formal / informal learning.

The two worlds are interested in validation for different reasons and do it in different ways. The EU bodies can usefully trace what is happening but time is of the essence when promoting approaches. National specificities and ways of accommodating can change.

VET has a good deal of experience in ‘accepting’ non-formal learning and ‘validating’ it in a formal examination.

Central European approach: yes, but as optimal approaches as indicators and guides, and general direction and as an exploration of practical aspects of recognition.

Question 2 table responses

*Are national or centralised public quality assurance and qualifications bodies too closely-linked to the formal education and training systems, and does this diminish their capacity to operate validation systems in a sufficiently flexible manner?*

Qualification bodies should be operationally independent- from formal ministry. They should use existing QA mechanisms to validate non-formal learning.

It depends on the country, context and institution; the principles are important. It also depends on the experts used- question of culture and tradition, but need to use existing institutions.

Validation of the learning outcomes/informal learning is different to validation of the learning process.

Quality assurance and qualifications framework bodies can provide a framework and level descriptors which can be useful guides but assessment on informal and non-formal learning has to be done by expert groups in relation to specific courses.

National or central QA bodies are needed to ensure reliability and trustworthiness of validation systems, particularly in the early years of development of these systems.

Link centralised QA bodies etc. to formal education and training.

The question is flexibility but with vigour. Don’t have 2 classes of qualifications but many paths to the one.

Formal education system can be too rigid, it can be difficult to get that system to “think outside the box”.

VET provision is disorganised by nature. It could be possible to lose something of nature when you package it too neatly.
Concerned at lower levels that experience will be shoe horned into certification, commodification of higher education has also taken place. All of this leads to more ideological debate. Is formal education and training a bad thing? Sometimes, yes, if they put non-traditional learners off entry into validation processes.

This is a surprising question – members of these groups are not necessarily experts – don’t forget HE with regard to validation.

To validate learning across all 8 levels you need a lot of actors to participate and there is no evidence this is happening.

Are they too closely linked? This does not apply to many countries. The close links can force people towards the formal side of things.

The situation is different for the non-formal and informal scenarios.

It depends on how closely your education and training systems are to QA.

Non-formal - there’s no problem, they’re not too closely linked. Informal – can be a problem unless the formal system recognised informal learning does not do damage.

There is a need for feedback and evaluation of the existing national and regional systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning.

Yes, they are too closely linked to the formal system. Objectivity is important, as there are mixed views. Separate systems for assessing informal learning towards qualifications at particular levels are required. With a complementary system of validation or recognition.

There is a need for close links between national or centralised QA / Qualification bodies to formal education and training. However, they can reduce willingness to engage with different pathways (non-formal) and there is no incentive to provide recognition because of conflict of interest. There are also capacity issues.

For first and second level: yes! For 3rd level: no! Quality is at risk since non-formal training is much more difficult in quality assurance.

It is difficult to determine the minimum amount of learning outcomes or the volume of qualification to be linked to qualifications framework levels.

Trust in frameworks may decrease. This is a necessarily voluntary process – it’s difficult to motivate providers to apply to have their qualification and training offerings included in frameworks.

There are no risks if the learning is validated against existing programmes.

Additional table discussion comments

It was good to see women on the podium at last!

We need to ditch the distinctions between non-formal, informal and formal learning as they are not helpful.

The issue is validation of the learning experience of the individual who needs at times to have these identified, assessed, validated and certified.

The use of the same standards in qualification as for non-formal and informal learning is critical (for comparability and usefulness).

Let’s get rid of this language and talk and listen to learners- what are your needs or dreams?

Supporting rigor for people coming into the system invalidates the need for formalising formal education.

Portfolio building has a high cost. People often underestimate their experience. Building a portfolio can validate their learning and add on if necessary.

Why are we validating non-formal learning? Worry about dualism for separate groups of people, danger of people being moved out. All those who want to learn will learn if given the right environment, introductions etc.

Validation of informal learning has nothing to do with national frameworks of qualifications. The descriptors are too generic for the validation of informal or non-formal learning. Both types of learning need to be mapped to specific
programmes which are already validated. Validation is of paramount importance.

Plenary discussion

Pat Leahy

We will get our floor discussion underway.

We have a couple of questions that we will throw out to the floor when we are all ready, I think. Our first question that I’d like to throw out, and we’ll probably get this up on the screen: “what are the risks and barriers to opening up NQFs to validation of non-formal and informal learning?”

While you’re gathering your thoughts on that, unfortunately Michel Feutrie, who was unable to make it for our last panel, who was due to be on the panel that you saw earlier, but who in any case sent in his draft response, and just to give you something to think about, I thought I’d just briefly read his response to this question, what are the risks and barriers, and he begins somewhat bluntly by saying:

“I think that this question is not well formulated. Validation of non-formal and informal learning must become a standard way to get a qualification, as it is in some countries. This means that institutions awarding qualifications have to integrate validation as an element of their awarding system. And it’s because qualifications are positioned in an NQF that validation is part of a qualification framework. The danger, again from my point of view...”

That’s Michel’s point of view, not mine.

“...would be to create specific qualifications for validation of non-formal or informal learning. Some countries or sectors are tempted to do this. The risk would be to create second class qualifications with a lower value than normal qualifications.”

So, anybody interested in taking up some of those points or again asking some questions of our panellists, especially in regard to that difference between informal and non-formal learning?

Unidentified Speaker 1

I find it helpful for myself to refer to non-formal education and informal learning, because education implies educators and it implies structure, and the informal part doesn’t. For me, it is easier to generally approach the difference between the two. And there is one, two replies to it, I can take it.

Jens Bjornavold

Just to react to this non-formal and informal question: I think perhaps that is looking at wrong things, because what we are looking at are individual learning experiences from a lot of different settings. But what is characteristic for these learning experiences is that they have been gained outside education and training institutions in many cases, so they are not visible. You need to make them visible. So you’re speaking about the individual learning experiences and what we are trying to do with validation is to make these visible, to identify them, to document them, and in some cases, even to award a certificate or a qualification.

I think this is what the issue is and the challenge is that these learning experiences reflect each single person, and that is the difficulty here. It’s so varied, it’s so complex and you need to have assessment methods which are able to capture this flexibility. So I think when you discuss non-formal, informal, it’s simplifying it in a way, we should really look at the individual and its learning experiences.

Fernando Galán, European Students’ Union

Thanks again, Fernando Galán from the European Students Union. I would like to raise learning outcomes that have to have a separate kind of certification, because, for example, if you are in a higher education degree programme, even at the masters level, and one of your learning outcomes is to have proper communication skills, it doesn’t matter too much if you got those learning outcomes within the master programme or even in another activity that you are doing. That has to be recognised by the formal education system as far as you got
the learning outcome that you were expected to get.

My comment here is, qualifications frameworks, from my organisation is kind of the Rosetta stone. Everybody is able to refer to and to understand what we mean by them, not only the labour market, but also the students know when they are enrolling in any kind of education level, what are the expectations or what they should be? Even for higher education institutions when they are trying to go to other countries to get some kind of qualification agreements or to get mobility, even for the policy makers, to know how systems in other countries operate, not only within Europe but also outside Europe.

Unidentified Speaker 2

Yes, it was in fact in relation to Jens’ point. Again, clearly if it’s the learning outcome it’s not depending on the learning path and this will connect to what Jens just mentioned. The distinction between non-formal education and informal learning is valid on this point because a non-formal education means that you have people who go through an educational process in a non-formal system. I am thinking now specifically about youth organisations, which are a huge part of this. So young people learn amazing things in youth organisations and it’s a pedagogical process.

It’s important to notice this, because this is where the accreditation and the certification can happen. So you are facilitating the thoughts of young people involved. This is where I will say this distinction is still valid, because informal learning, even in this Conference for us as citizens, probably we are also informally learning, in terms of if we try to be learner centred for a while, then not only in our speech but in our practice. Here we are informally learning but it’s also a non-formal process because for the organiser you have a plan from A to B, and from B to C and this is a pedagogical thing and this is a non-formal learning because, of course, we will not go out with a diploma but we can go out with a certificate to say we took part in this conference and in this conference the subjects were this and this and this. I would ask is this is as simple as that but the question of how we can certify whatever is a different learning path, this is where really the challenge is, also taking in too the quality assurance and the quality assurance probably in this stay in the process itself.

Carina Linden, Ministry of Education and Research, Sweden

My name is Carina Linden, I’m from Sweden, and I work with the Ministry of Education and Research. I would like to take one step back to talking about national qualifications frameworks, framework for qualifications, we were talking a lot today about the formal qualifications sector but in a lot of countries there are also a lot of qualifications provided by the non-formal sector, by the economic sectors, by private actors, and those, of course, also have their role in the national qualification frameworks.

We do things, as we know, very differently in our countries, and in some countries when you talk about a national qualifications framework, you have national awarding bodies. Providers could apply to take part and then it would be a national award, so to say. In other countries it is the sectors themselves that own their qualifications, they provide them. So even if they are included in a national framework, the State doesn’t take over the ownership of the qualification, it will still be the qualification of the sector.

So I ask you to take this into the equation as well, that our system is very different and that even if it’s the non-formal system that might be the basis of the framework, there are also other actors that are included in the framework in certain countries.

Having said that, I would like to come back to the validation issue and say that validation is, of course, very important and we see it as a prerequisite to include the procedures for validation for qualifications included in a national framework. But it is important, from my point of view at least, that qualifications included in the framework are qualifications and not maybe individual records of learning process, that is a very important process but a separate process from my point of view.
Pat Leahy
I might just throw out another question. Does the validation, I wonder, of non-formal and informal learning, does it transfer from vocational training to higher education and are there ways that QA can promote that sort of a transfer?

Unidentified Speaker 3
Sorry, I only have a question about the question, or a thought about the questions, which is - why are we always preoccupied about the transfer from VET to higher education? How about from higher education to VET?

Pat Leahy
That's a good question, can anybody answer it?

Patrick Werquin
Thank you. I understand the point Ana is making but there is no demand, there is just no demand for people in higher education to go the VET system, full stop.

Unidentified Speaker 4
In France, there are many, many young people failing in higher education and going and asking for qualifications off chambers of industry or trade. One of the jobs of these chambers of industry or trade is to try to understand the learning outcomes of universities to be able to make these young people who failed in university be able to take their training courses in their spare time.

Unidentified Speaker 5
This is going to present the VET system to us as the failure system.

Jens Bjornavold
I just need to comment on this movement from higher education to VET because that is clearly empirically wrong. We see many countries where individuals and students, who certainly have not failed in higher education, see the relevance of actually adding up their education and training by going into vocational education and training programmes. We see that in many countries, it’s been a significantly improving tendency and it’s exactly the opposite of, as you say, establishing VET as a failure system. It’s actually pointing to a closer cooperation between higher education and the vocational education and training system, and this we can document quite clearly.
Some key points from session 3.2

- Frameworks and quality assurance procedures are challenged by the diversity, speed and range of informal and non-formal learning
- Non-formal qualifications could be recognised first by the EQF advisory group and Bologna follow-up group
- Quality assurance is essential for the validation process for non-formal and informal learning because it helps address distinctions between validation and recognition; clear definitions are needed
- Qualifications frameworks are a useful lens to support the validation and recognition of non-formal and informal learning, where applicants are motivated to seek validation and recognition
- Quality assurance processes can, in the context of informal learning, be perceived as invalidating learners' efforts
Chapter 7

Introduction to the Draft Conference Statement

Pat Leahy

Okay, thanks for your participation in that discussion. My final task is to introduce our last speaker again, as I say, who will deliver an introduction to the draft Presidency Statement, would you welcome please the Head of Qualification Services at QQI, Bryan Maguire.

Presentation of the Draft Statement by Bryan Maguire, Qualifications Services, QQI

Thank you very much, Pat, and thank you all for persisting with us to the end of this afternoon, it’s been a busy session.

Just as we were concluding that session, we distributed to the tables a draft of a statement. What you’ve got in front of you is based, of course, not just on what's happened today. It is still very much a draft, it is based both on the research paper that Jim had prepared and that we heard his presentation on this morning, but also on the reactions that we had from the panellists, and I want to thank those invited panellists who came up here today and they all submitted their responses in writing last week and enabled us to prepare some initial outline of what we might say as part of the European Presidency about the theme of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks.

We have been collecting the notes from the table discussions and my colleagues have then been typing them. I have ten pages here, and that’s just from the first session this morning. So I made some changes over lunch to this text, so what you have here is a work in progress. I’m inviting you to contribute to that work in progress. In some cases we have suggested some concrete actions, operational actions, but in other cases we haven't made detailed recommendations, so I'm looking for further suggestions. Some of them contained have featured in the discussion this afternoon and will work their way in overnight and again tomorrow morning into the final statement from the Presidency.

If you take this draft away and maybe take it to the pub and discuss it, I’m not sure whether it will work or not but anyway, if you do have suggestions though, we have a suggestions box here.

We will work on these overnight and when you go into parallel workshops we'll be finalising the Conference Statement for presentation at the conclusion of the event.

With that, I do want to thank you for your participation and certainly to thank the panellists who not alone stood up here today but who also presented their written responses that we used to help draft this Conference Statement. You will find the text of those statements in your packs in the USB key, because they came at the last minute we didn’t print them all out. They will, of course, also feature in the proceedings for the Conference that we prepare afterwards.

So, I will just point out some of the features in the Conference Statement. On the topic of the relationship between the EQF and quality assurance, we note that in the EQF recommendation, annex 3, which already refers to the common principles for quality assurance across higher education and VET, and we're asking the question of whether these principles are in fact sufficiently strong common ground, or whether they need to be reinforced. This can be examined, of course, as part of the EQF review, evaluation that's going on at the moment, but we would welcome suggestions at this stage.

On the higher education side we have, following the Bucharest meeting of Ministers last year, a revision going on of the European standards and guidelines. We're calling for this revision to make reference to the national qualifications frameworks based on learning outcomes because this is not part of the original European standards and guidelines.
There is also a review of EQAVET, and this was mentioned in Xavier Prats Monné’s original presentation this morning, the reviews of the various European instruments. The question is whether or not the existing framework in the EQAVET area is sufficiently robust to generate the kind of confidence that we need in the implementation of qualifications frameworks, and if not, to suggest possibly some alternatives, but certainly to give a view as to whether or not this is something that needs to be carried forward.

We have just had an interesting interaction, discussion on the relationship between higher education and VET and what direction the traffic goes and where the demand is. What we are urging in the communiqué is that the sectors do engage in discussion. I think it’s quite interesting to have the sectors in the same room, as we have here today, to see whether we can build on the understanding of how each other ‘does’ quality assurance and to promote mobility between the sectors, I won’t say in any direction, but in every direction that’s needed to give us the kind of skills that Europe needs, whether that’s from higher education to VET or from VET to higher education. I think we could probably identify both being needed.

When it comes then to the engagement of employers, and we had an interesting session discussing how employers can become involved, if employers and the formal systems of education and training both have an interest in having skilled graduates, then given this shared concern, it’s incumbent on employers to articulate their requirements, they have to be able to say what they want and say it in a way that can be translated into qualifications and into study programmes and then participate meaningfully in the way that we heard, for example, Kevin Marshall describing his engagement with the quality assurance system. So it’s not simply a question of changing all the education system to meet the employment requirements, the employers have to find a common language as well, or acquire the common language of qualifications frameworks so that we can have this dialogue. But in turn, of course, where they do articulate their requirements and they do articulate what graduates are bringing to the labour market, or not bringing to the labour market, that the education and training providers can respond to this feedback. So that’s point 6.

Point 7 is about the non-formal and informal, and we’ve just discussed that, so I won’t say anything about that, also because I need to change the text in response to some of the discussions we’ve just had.

Finally, there is a discussion about the actions we might take in relation to the relationship between Europe and the wider world. Again, I won’t discuss those now because we’ll be taking those up again tomorrow morning.
The future prosperity and happiness of Europe depends on its people and their skills. Those skills are revealed in the productivity of the labour force and in the vitality of social and cultural life but they are documented in the qualifications achieved by its citizens. European qualifications frameworks can facilitate the comparison and recognition of those qualifications across Europe on the basis of mutual trust. Those qualifications frameworks can only make credible contributions to mutual trust when they are supported by robust quality assurance systems. Only in this way can we have confidence that the qualifications are fit for purpose and that those holding qualifications can perform the tasks that society proposes to them, including working for others or creating new employment for themselves and others.

The Bologna Process has brought about significant reforms of higher education systems across the European Higher Education Areas especially in the area of qualifications and quality assurance. One of the most visible changes being the introduction of the three cycle framework of degrees, from the Qualifications Framework for the European Higher Education Area (QF-EHEA), characterised in terms of learning outcomes, now found in each of the 47 member states, to a greater or lesser extent. The second is the adoption of the model of institutionally-based internal quality assurance, complemented by external quality assurance carried out by independent agencies, which in turn are themselves subjected to an independent review by their international peers.

The diversity of traditions in vocational education and training has been made clearer and is more readily the object of mutual understanding thanks to the references of national qualifications frameworks or systems to the European Framework for Lifelong Learning (EQF). EQF has served as a stimulus for the reform of the qualifications in these systems. These are now expressed in terms of learning outcomes and quality assured within national systems in keeping with the specifications of the EQAVET framework.

Interaction between the VET and HE sectors within some countries and between countries is hampered by the diversity of institutional arrangements in the respective sectors. This makes them less transparent to each other. The respective providers and their public authorities are urged to make their quality assurance arrangements as mutually intelligible as possible, to share good practices across sectors and to learn about each other’s approaches to implementing learning outcomes. National and European authorities can collaborate on identifying system level information that can contribute to mutual understanding and cross-sectoral mobility.

Formal education and training systems and employers have their distinct respective responsibilities but have a shared concern about the skills that graduates, whether from initial or continuing education, bring to the labour market. Given this shared concern it is incumbent on employers to articulate their requirements in both the short, medium and long term and to assist the authorities responsible for qualifications (and the national frameworks in which they are situated) to ensure that these needs are reflected in those qualification specifications. Qualification specifications however must be realised in the concrete knowledge skill and competence acquired and demonstrated by graduates. Feedback from employers and other social partners as well as from learners is critical ensuring that the quality assurance systems function effectively. This is true both for the local internal quality assurance arrangements of education and training providers and for the external quality assurance systems organised at national or other levels. Providers of education and training must in turn match the commitment of employers by
responding to the feedback received rather than insisting on their own sole prerogative to determine curriculum and the shape of the educational experience. It is only through mutual interaction of this kind between employers and providers that quality assurance can contribute to sustainable gains in employability.

6 Even if fully implemented and quality assured qualifications frameworks were to bring about the desired reforms in the formal education and training systems of Europe we would still fall short of fully recognising the potential of the European Area of Qualifications and Skills unless we also make advances in the validation of non-formal and informal learning. The pace of change in the skills requirements of post-industrial society has led to a proliferation of non-formal training which in some cases is assessed and leads to certification which falls outside the system of officially recognised qualifications. National qualifications frameworks can be designed or extended in such a way as to accommodate such qualifications. Informal learning can also be assessed in ways that permit the awarding of qualifications that are included in national qualifications frameworks. The European recommendation on the validation of non-formal and informal learning also lays an onus on member states to develop systems for the validation of non-formal and informal learning by 2018. These validation systems should be quality assured in such a way that holders of the resultant qualifications enjoy the same confidence and recognition afforded to qualifications from the formal education and training system.

7 European progress in developing a regional system of mutual recognition of qualifications and underlying quality assurance has attracted much interest in other parts of the world. It is probably too early to say whether confidence has grown globally in Europe's qualifications as result but the resolve and common purpose shown to date has inspired a desire in some parts of the world to demonstrate affinity with the European models. Most importantly it is not just the technical features of the qualifications frameworks that are being imitated but the model of democratic participation through the empowerment of various stakeholders in the education and training systems to play their role in the development and implementation of frameworks. Public authorities, providers, and social partners in member states are encouraged to support these developments though taking part in bilateral and multilateral projects and initiatives. The EQF Advisory Group is asked to consider how best to respond to the requests to demonstrate affinity to the EQF.

The Irish Presidency has been pleased to host this conference on quality assurance in qualifications frameworks and to welcome 150 delegates from over 40 countries to Dublin Castle. We believe strongly in the integration of qualifications across different sectors of education and training as a key to lifelong learning. We consider that a joined up policy approach to quality assurance is necessary to achieve such integration and are grateful to the delegates for the stimulating way in which they engaged with the challenges during this conference.

To be updated overnight on 12th March following Day 1 proceedings and finalised at close of conference for web publication and distribution at EQF- Advisory group on 14th March.

Responsible: Bryan Maguire
Approval: DES and European Commission
Challenges for the workshops to resolve

Pádraig Walsh, CEO, QQI

Good morning, everybody, and welcome to the second day of our conference on Quality Assurance and Qualifications Framework.

Following the discussions on the various topics from your tables yesterday, and while the rest of us were enjoying our dinner and listening to the music, a small team of staff from QQI worked last night to try and distil the rapporteur’s notes, representing what I would term the knowledge of Aristotle, the skills of Descartes and the competence of Einstein so as to present the challenges identified for Europe, which will be further discussed at the workshop sessions later this morning. They are able to present a number of key common issues across the four key themes in the Conference that we discussed yesterday that need to be addressed at both national and EU level.

Having assembled these together, they concern issues such as data. There certainly is a significant challenge around the availability and analysis of appropriate data, and a challenge in the capacity of the system to generate timely, high quality and useful information to support policy making processes.

The issue of coordination also came up a number of times; the need for greater coordination came through as a recurring theme in the discussions. That challenge crosses both the vocational education and training and the higher education spaces. It relates to education, training and the labour market and the policies and agencies responsible for quality assurance and qualifications framework, and in the areas that we discussed of formal, non-formal and informal learning. You felt that sometimes a lack of clarity can contribute to weaknesses in integration, which affect the implementation of policy with the risk that actions are not taken up because of these deficits.

You also stressed the importance of measuring impact and effectiveness. Obviously a range of tools, actions and initiatives have been instigated in the areas of vocational education and training and higher education, quality assurance and qualifications frameworks over the past 10 years. We need to establish the added value of these initiatives and whether they have achieved their stated objectives. The challenge is to identify who should do this and to develop appropriate mechanisms for measuring such impact.

You also felt it was important to get the right combination of top down and bottom up. The implementation of qualifications frameworks and quality assurance is highly dependent on the engagement and contribution of practitioners on the ground. They need to understand and have the tool to participate effectively. In turn, their views and experiences need to feed into policy development and implementation.

You stressed the importance of diversity and the tension, healthy in many cases, between the desire for convergence and the maintenance of a richness of diversity. There is a requirement to focus on mutual understanding. It is important to differentiate between the attentions of policy and rhetoric; policy implementation needs to be fit for purpose and needs to be contextualised. Sometimes there’s a risk of a disconnection between the rhetoric and the reality. For example; the difference between the pace of development at a European level and at the national level. There may also be too great an expectation that qualifications frameworks and quality assurance systems can deliver on objectives such as mobility and trust that are not solely embedded within these instruments.

You stressed the importance of learner centeredness. It appears that we all agree with that, the importance of learner centeredness is an important orientation. It was less clear, however, how this translates into action. There is a tendency to give a voice to this in a way that sometimes is unaccountable. At a very basic level there is a need to communicate directly with learners, and this can be further extended to imply that developments and policies need to be communicable to the public in general.
And finally the importance of a vision, that there was a real desire expressed to realise the common vision and objectives around transparency, trust and mobility. The actors responsible must understand this vision on objectives and be able to share and communicate them. There can be a divergence between the interpretation of this vision at system level and at the level of the institution or agencies.

Having collated these challenges, which you identified at your tables yesterday, we will have an opportunity later this morning to use the workshops to help you resolve them, and I wish you well in that work.
Session 4: Promoting confidence in Europe’s qualifications on a global scale

Pat Leahy

Good morning, ladies and gentlemen, you are very welcome to the second day of our conference. The title of our fourth and final session in this part of the conference this morning is ‘Promoting Confidence in Europe’s Qualifications on a Global Scale’. I thought it might be useful just to reprise some of the points and questions that Jim’s paper yesterday raised when dealing with this subject. Some of the points, questions, that he raised were:

“Can or should European QF and QA models be transferred and translated into emerging democracies?

What are the minimum accepted standards required for building international trust and global connectivity?”

He also raised a number of additional points and questions:

“Should there be wide stakeholder involvement in QF development and implementation?

Are there autonomous QF and QA bodies, with independent student participation in QA processes?”

The transnational architecture of European QA and QF is a real achievement, he said, and Europe is well positioned to benefit from global developments in these domains. But, the tools in themselves, he said, are not enough; they must be seen to deliver real change.

“Continuing European authority in these spheres will be dependent on actual delivery of the outcomes for which they have been instituted and we must meet the expectations of the learner, the labour market and a wider society.”

That’s just a few of the questions and themes that Jim concluded with in this regard yesterday and which may arise in our subsequent discussions, both with the panel and among yourselves.

Our panel this morning consists of Eva Cheng, from the Qualifications Framework Secretariat in Hong Kong, Mohamed Slassi Sennou, from the General Confederation of Moroccan Business in Morocco, and Allan Brüün Pedersen is from the Agency for Universities and Internationalisation in Denmark. Unfortunately, the fourth member of our panel, Karine Harutyunyan, was unable to make it this morning.

Let me kick off by asking Eva what would you see as the objectives or benefits of referencing the Hong Kong QF to the European QF?

Eva Cheng, Qualifications Framework Secretariat, Hong Kong

I am glad that you ask these questions because I came all the way here in order to let the participants know that the Hong Kong qualifications framework is very interested in taking one step further. Whether or not we could have the EQF referencing project—okay, there are many, many benefits for that.

The Hong Kong QF, to give you a little bit of background, is more or less modelled on the European QF or the UK QF more specifically. However, we have our own characteristics, which work well. Some of the characteristics don’t work well, and if I may have a chance to share them later, that would be great too.

First of all we want to do the referencing project, primarily because the Hong Kong Government wants to make Hong Kong an educational hub, which means more inflow and outflow of students, graduates, professionals, teachers. As a matter of fact, Hong Kong is seen as a kind of gateway to China, and of course, because of the economic prosperity of the PRC, many PRC students want to use Hong Kong as a stepping stone to go to overseas or maybe to pursue
overseas qualifications in Hong Kong. This is one of the major reasons for that.

On the other hand, we want to take forward the EQF referencing, because the Hong Kong QF encounters opposition as such in the Hong Kong contest. We have difficulties from some of the employers or even the providers: why do we need to set up the Hong Kong QF? The university sector, they think that their education or their qualifications are very ordered, are very orderly and they don’t need any QA, that’s already built in there.

For the employers, they have difficulties in also understanding why they need the QF, whether or not the QF would promote developments. Such kinds of questions we have been asking yesterday and today. If we could have some kind of alignment with the EQF and then let them know that in the European context all the EU countries actually have their own QF system and they have all kinds of criteria to meet in order to establish their QF system smoothly so that it works well. If we could take forward the referencing project, we sort of know what kind of stage, what stage of development we are at right now and what kind of shortcomings or what kind of improvements we need to make. That’s why we want to take this forward.

On the other hand, although we have taken the initiative of engaging an expert to do a feasibility study and let us know whether or not we are at a stage ready for the referencing - the extent to which our QF has progressed healthily. We saw that as very positive but, on the other hand, what the government need to really think about is, if those benefits that I have just mentioned are preconceived, or are they really true? Will they really happen after the EQF referencing? We are now in the sort of stage making our indication known to the EU advisory group. On the other hand we are trying to do a lot of thinking together to see whether or not we really want to push it forward, and whether or not if we do so, we have the other value, so called, to our Hong Kong QF.

Pat Leahy

Do you sell the benefits when you are talking to the educational institutions and to business, do you sell the benefits as something which will be internationally saleable, or as something which will contain benefits on its own for Hong Kong?

Eva Cheng

Okay. I think first of all those kinds of benefits; we want to open the eyes and minds of our providers, and especially the employers in Hong Kong. Although Hong Kong has quite a rich and affluent economy, 90% of the employers actually belong to the so called SME sector. They are successful because of many, many reasons, but, on the other hand, they are very important stakeholders in the educational training of the Hong Kong society as a whole, and that’s why we would want them to know QF in addition to the quality assurance label attached to it. We also have all kinds of infrastructure in supporting, promoting the work skills of the Hong Kong workforce.

One statistic may illustrate the importance of a QF from our perspective, is that among the 305 million Hong Kong workforce in Hong Kong. Over 50% of them have an educational attainment level below level 2, which is not a very good figure when compared to the Irish one. I read the EU statistics - meaning that Hong Kong is quite rich but on the other hand it has really low educational attainment. We want the participation of the employers and the learners in the QF so that eventually their educational level or qualification level could be upgraded. That’s our implicit aim for launching the QF.

Pat Leahy

Mohamed, if I can turn to you. Perhaps you could tell us how partners from business and industry are participating in efforts to raise the quality of education and training in Morocco.

Mohamed Slassi Sennou, General Confederation of Business, Morocco

The organisation I represent includes 31 sectors. It includes whole industries and business enterprises of the kingdom of Morocco. The sectors contribute to raising the quality of education and training in Morocco through three levels of interventions. The first one is the elaboration of the skills for jobs. This
referential includes the definition of the skill and the knowledge according to the QF level descriptions, and also the specification of learning outcomes and the mode of assessment.

The second level of intervention is that they are involved in the elaboration of what we call sectorial engineering, that leads to strategic diagnosis of the field and the training plan by field.

Through these two levels of interventions, employers contribute to improving the quality and service of the skill production process and also the final result connected to the learning outcomes. Otherwise the sectors are also involved in developing what we call a regional, sectorial qualifications framework.

This is a highly pragmatic approach because it's a framework, a qualifications framework, between two sectors. It is being used by a medical education project under the auspices of ETF, which is now at the experimental stage. The project includes seven EuroMed countries, Spain, Italy, France, Morocco, Tunisia, Egypt and Jordan. And two sectors, tourism and construction.

The objective is to build what is referred to as an extended sector, by analogy to extended enterprise in the supply chain. By sharing their strengths and anticipating the dynamic of the value chain, the extended sector proceeds to a smart co-localisation of occupations that produce sustainable competitiveness and mobility for individuals.

Pat Leahy

Allan, let me turn to you. How would we assess whether the qualifications frameworks have promoted confidence in Europe's qualifications on a global scale or world scale? When will we know and are there other factors that are operating in that sphere to reduce confidence?

Allan Brüün Pedersen, Agency for Universities and internationalisation, Denmark

When will we know? I’m not going to say “18 April 2016”! I think this is a tricky question. But first of all I think we need to straighten our backs a bit and say that our starting point actually is in other areas. Actually there is a great deal of confidence in European qualifications already. I mean for decades or even more, we had students and workers coming to Europe to study and to work and still today we have many, many students from outside Europe reaching, coming to study at our educational institutions.

So, in many ways I think European qualifications are a very hard currency actually. If you talk to people outside Europe, they look at the European higher education area as a very strong asset. I think sometimes when we speak of it here we say:’okay, we’ve done a lot but we still need a deep and true implementation of the European higher education area’. But looking at it from outside European Union, you can actually see that we’ve gone a long a way because there’s a lot of respect about the more coherent educational area that we have created.

Going into vocational education and training, I think the international cooperation we have in the European region in vocational education and training is actually unparalleled anywhere. We have so many quality VET systems, which in many other regions of the world, may not be there at the same point at least.

So the starting point is actually confidence in itself. But this does not mean that we have to lie back on the couch and indulge ourselves in the La Dolce Vita as the Roman Empire did. We need to move on and we need this further implementation of a European higher education area and also the thoughts mentioned in the European area for schools and qualifications, because the true way to safeguard the attractiveness of European qualification is when we have a common study and labour market, when there are not so many problems about crossing borders in Europe where you’re not being barred by recognition problems or credit transfer problems and all these things. So we need to strengthen even further the European cooperation within all educational sectors.

Obviously the qualifications frameworks can be at the very heart of that, because qualifications frameworks are the crossroad for the different educational sectors. This is the first place vocational education and training and higher education actually meet. Also with the learning outcome approach, it’s much more geared
towards employability, so I think we need to
develop that. Our qualifications frameworks, at
this point at least, are they the right tool or can
they promote further confidence in European
qualifications? I think it’s a bit premature to
know, because still, as we all know here, a lot
of countries have not yet finalised their own
qualifications frameworks, and even more
countries have not finalised the self-referencing
process to the EQF, or the referencing process to
the EQF and the self-certification process to the
Bologna Framework.

We are still at an early stage within our own
region here, where we actually don’t quite know
what will happen. How much mutual trust
within Europe will we actually get from these
processes that we have launched? With some
of the examples that we have here we still have
debates and discussions about the fact that
some higher educational institutions might be
very positive at least about the referencing of
vocational education and training programmes
to the same levels in the EQF as our own
higher education programmes. We’ve seen the
infamous debates on access qualifications
maybe being referenced to different levels, we’ve
had the same discussions on the short cycle
qualifications. Qualifications which we used to
see as being comparable in our international
European cooperation may be referenced to
different levels and will that create mutual trust
within Europe or will it actually in some cases
make waters even muddier?

The very fact that we hear that there is a great
interest from Hong Kong in signalling affinity
with the EQF, we see many other cases of
qualifications frameworks emerging outside
of Europe which are very much interested
in referencing themselves to the European
Qualifications Frameworks - that in itself is also
a signal of confidence in European qualifications.
But still I think we also need to make sure that
we sort out our own problems first and make
sure that we have generated enough mutual
trust once all the referencing processes, the
self-certification processes have been finalised
within our own region.

General panel discussion

Eva Cheng

Can I offer a couple of observations on this? The
question is, how will you assess whether or not
the QF has promoted confidence in Europe’s
qualification? I have to say yes it has, from my
perspective as a non-European, because the
QFs in different countries in Europe at least
give us a tool for us to understand the diversity
of qualifications in different countries in
Europe. The qualification system in Europe is so
different from ours and we have no ways to fully
understand what a qualification is in France or
maybe in Germany or maybe in Denmark. We
really don’t understand how VET works so well in
the European countries. But with the QF, with the
EQF referencing, with the entire organisation like
the ENQA and then EQAVET and all these kind of
things really give us more experience about how
the system works here.

As a matter of fact, this QF system also enables
us to communicate with the PRC government
regarding what a qualification is like in the
EU, in which every single country has their
own characteristics. So I must say that the
confidence from our place or from China is there.
We have the confidence there, but the question
still remains whether or not a more user friendly
system of recognising such qualifications from
the EU would be useful.

So that’s one of the main tasks that Hong Kong
QF wants to do. We struggle to launch the so
called policy of local accreditation of non-local
qualifications. I don’t know whether or not you
like it or you agree with it, but that’s one way
to make European qualifications or overseas
qualifications being more recognised under
the Hong Kong QF, and, of course, their funding
incentive related to it as well.

Pat Leahy

Mohamed, the European model of regional
cooperation in the Development of Qualifications
Framework, is that relevant for you and for other
regions?
Mohammed Slassi Sennou

Thank you, yes. For the kingdom of Morocco, the European experience is rich in learning and helps us during the design stage, especially what not to do so as to avoid error. The diversity of institutional context is different in Europe as are the specific issues to be addressed in relation to qualifications. This allowed us a better understanding of our own situation.

First, the positive approach of all relevant stakeholders is crucial for the success of the project. The project started in 2007, and in 2011 the social and economic partners were invited to join the National Steering Committee. In less than one year the national qualifications framework was agreed and produced. Finally, the institutional form of the framework, which is currently under discussion between the stakeholders, we should build on the European institutional model which is closest to ours.

Pat Leahy

Thanks. Allan, turning to you again, the whole idea of informal and non-formal qualifications came up a lot yesterday, do you think that there’s a risk that opening up qualifications frameworks to include more diverse forms of learning will undermine confidence in formal qualifications and the frameworks and how could that be avoided?

Allan Brüün Pedersen

Well, first of all let me just react to Eva. I think it’s nice to hear that the qualifications frameworks have promoted more confidence in European qualifications in Hong Kong and I totally agree with you that the transparency which stems from our qualifications framework is very useful for international cooperation. Myself, dealing mainly with recognition of foreign qualifications, I can also say that we will definitely also use the Hong Kong Qualifications Framework in recognition of Hong Kong qualifications because it gives us much more knowledge and much more transparency about the policy systems there. So I completely agree with you there.

The opening up of our frameworks to more diverse forms of learning, is there a risk for the confidence there? Yes, there is a risk, I believe we can say that. I think it’s a fact that many higher education institutions still find that even recognising formal qualifications from other countries can be somewhat difficult for them. Even recognising formal qualifications from other universities or higher institutions inside their own countries can be quite difficult for them. So, opening up a qualifications framework for other types of learning will probably be an even greater challenge and also for recognition authorities to be able to recognise qualifications based on other types of learning, I mean many recognition authorities are carved out of the academic world and they may have the same scepticism of other types of learning that we sometimes at least encounter in higher education.

But having said that, it’s obvious that qualifications frameworks are geared towards the inclusion of other types of learning. The whole learning outcome approach, and the fact that qualifications are now to a much greater extent being written in learning outcomes, makes formal qualifications more comparable to the other types of qualifications. The validation of non-formal and informal learning, I mean it’s easier to compare these types of qualifications with formal qualifications once the formal qualifications are also described in learning outcomes.

I think we also have to promote the benefits to our institutions. The qualifications framework can act as a translation device for giving credit transfer for other types of learning and maybe also for opening up, having a broader, a more social dimension in their admission policies.

For this to happen, obviously it’s very important that we have very strong and very transparent quality assurance mechanisms for the other types of learning. It’s very important that anyone can see that the validation of non-formal and informal learning is clearly that the learners’ achievements are clearly identified, documented, assessed and finally validated. It is very important also that private qualifications and international qualifications undergo the same type of quality assurance, maybe accreditation or other types of quality assurance regimes in order to be able to get the acceptance from the mouth, from the formal qualifications that they can actually be
referenced and placed at the same levels as their own qualifications in our frameworks.

**Pat Leahy**

In the same broad area, the formal assessment of learning outcomes, is it sufficient to give confidence in qualifications awarded on the basis of non-formal and informal learning? Or are there other interventions required to change the sort of culture of learning recognition?

**Eva Cheng**

This is quite a difficult question. May I refer to the Hong Kong context? Okay, first of all, the Hong Kong QF has a very special mechanism, we call it the RPL, in capital letters. Under this RPL mechanism there are altogether 310 qualifications that the workforce in seven industries can apply for. In order to apply for RPL qualifications they have to produce working experience documents, or they could choose to go through the assessment.

We have this kind of set-up primarily because we understand that the qualification level of the Hong Kong people, of the Hong Kong workforce, is very low and we tend to think that with this kind of mechanism, the workforce, the employees would be interested in producing their working experience and then going through the assessment so that they could get a level 1, level 2, level 3 or level 4 qualification. We thought this would be welcome and the employers would like that as well. But, as a matter of fact, we launched that RPL mechanism five years ago, in seven industries and only 1% of the workforce has applied for it.

So this kind of mechanism is for non-formal learning because it is based on experience, they go through a formal assessment. We found that with the formal assessment system the employers and their employees and even the providers would have confidence to work such a scheme. It’s very low, I have to say. For the employers, they are not too keen on this, because they are not open to such qualifications, they still think that pursuing a programme will really verify your ability, and going through the RPL assessment is not equivalent or is not of the same esteem as pursuing a programme. For the providers, of course they would have that kind of thinking, and even more so. They would not regard an RPL qualification as equivalent. Therefore, the employees, they don’t have incentives as well because the RPL qualification is not related to licence to practice or related to entry to any job post entry at all.

They may have a QF recognised qualification but they don’t see the benefit of it or they don’t see any uses for it. I remember very clearly yesterday at my table, a gentlemen there indicated very well in their experience that as a matter of fact the employees are interested in knowing the recognition rather than the qualification itself. So, I would say in the Hong Kong QF context, we go through the formal assessment system, but it doesn’t work too well.

Regarding whether or not we need other interventions, we will have to think about it. Maybe we can rely on one of our experts in helping us to rethink about this policy as well.

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**Table discussion**

**Pat Leahy**

Thanks to all our panellists, that brings the panel discussion part of this morning’s session to a close. Fascinating insights from very different parts of the world.

As you will recall from yesterday, we have a couple of specific questions for you to consider and for you to formulate your responses to in table discussions. The questions are:

*Is the emerging European area for skills and qualifications, heralded in Rethinking Education, being delivered in a way that promotes global recognition and mobility?*

“How should Europe respond to the global developments in qualifications frameworks and quality assurance? Should it insist on a consistent approach or recognise the inevitability of diversity? Do you think that global levels are a good idea?”

“How can countries external to the EU/EEA or EHEA signal their affinity with EQF and QF-EHEA?”

Plenty of food for discussion there.
Question 1 table responses

*Is the emerging European area for skills and qualifications, heralded in Rethinking Education, being delivered in a way that promotes global recognition and mobility?*

Yes, but we need to remove explicit reference to “Rethinking Education” which is limited in its approach. Mobility is not just ‘re-mobility’ of labour or an economic issue.

Obviously yes; in terms of recognition; but this is questionable in relation to mobility. However, the issue was raised about transparency versus recognition. There is a feeling that the EQF is about transparency and not recognition as there are no qualifications in EQF.

We find that the diversity of national systems has to be maintained because it is Europe’s strength. We have to clearly communicate that the EQF is a translation tool to promote transparency and understanding and is not primarily for recognition of qualifications. Clear communication is paramount.

Yes, it is being delivered in a way that considers European diversity and is a good starting point for global consideration. It’s too early to detect if it’s going to become or establish barriers to global expansion – it’s more of a strategic direction for now.

Education in Europe was highly regarded before qualifications frameworks, but the EQF makes them easier to understand in the contexts of other constraints. The EQF therefore, increases confidence; the translation tool is helpful.

We’re not convinced that international employers are interested in frameworks and levels. Employers are interested in a combination of qualifications and work experience. This is perceived to be a hidden tension between employers and providers – providers need to consider more generic skills.

It might be too early to tell, we don’t have enough information to know. The internal consistency and QA of levels from country to country might undermine the credibility of the EQF globally. Ideally if things were consistent and measurable, then probably yes.

The EQF could benefit from incorporating input data as well as output data.

The movement of labour is an issue and will require greater acceptance of QFs for skills labour market requirements. This has not yet been achieved for VET.

Question 2 table responses

*How should Europe respond to the global developments in qualifications frameworks and quality assurance? Should it insist on a consistent approach or recognise the inevitability of diversity? Do you think that global levels are a good idea?*

There seems to be consensus that Europe needs to embed its own QF systems first and ensure transparency and mobility and progression within and between its own QF’s before it expands at too great a speed outside of Europe.

If a framework is transparent it will promote connections from outside EU. Learning outcomes plus EQF level guidelines must be made clear. They need the same criteria and procedures to enable connectivity outside EU as within.

The presumption is that European Frameworks are the ones to aspire to. We have not interrogated how other systems work and explored learning from them.

Can Europe insist on its own model of methodology, when Europe is still addressing many challenges with skills and qualifications? Europe can put forward what it has learned so far in this process, so that other regions can take this into account, if relevant. European developments are still at a relatively early stage.

Yes, consistency is good in principle but there must be diversity. We must recognise the cultural constraints. Education is cultural.

While we want to recognise diversity it is important to have a reference point to measure experience and prior learning. A consistent approach is required, yes.

The answer might be in the question: “inevitability of diversity”. There is a need to know more about developments in other frameworks. We are far from having consistency within the
EQF, something that at first might be key to global interactions.

QA should underpin alignment between frameworks.

QA is dynamic and frameworks and guidelines need consistent review and updating.

We need to ensure that Frameworks are robust within Europe before Europe reaches out.

The EQF Advisory Group should look out to external audiences in future. Europe needs to look more outwards as others are looking to us.

The merits, advantages and disadvantages should be clearly articulated and understood.

With global recognition there is always the fear of accepting lower levels of quality as equivalent. How can countries safeguard against programmes without QA being aligned to QF? Should there be a badge of approval?

Global agreements should be based on ‘mutual respect’; e.g. all first cycle graduates to be accepted on second cycle degrees with minimum expectation and accreditation.

It is important to identify the appropriate terminology to describe the developing relationship between externals and the European meta-frameworks, if it’s about alignment rather than recognition or referencing.

If transparency can be achieved through shared common principles then the same principles should apply globally. Transfer between systems can be hindered by language.

Outside Europe there seems to be fewer problems in reorganising qualifications than there is within Europe.

Use the EQF as a trademark for QA. Build on the EQF to make global levels.

Question 3 table responses

How can countries external to the EU/EEA or EHEA signal their affinity with EQF and QF-EHEA?

First we need to know:

• Who is seeking to align with the EQF or Bologna process?

• What sort(s) of arrangements are they seeking?

• If they are independently assessed to confirm the alignment.

Europe should seek to co-operate rather than control. On the other hand, if we do not set out how external countries should relate to EQF or Bologna they will just do it unilaterally.

What will be the impact on EQF where International Qualifications are included in some National Frameworks? How can you ensure that they are included at the same level in every country? Different approaches may lead to different conclusions. International qualifications require further scrutiny in the context of QF’s and quality assurance. Instead of imposing QA in a consistent manner globally Europe should look at alignment mechanisms.

We need to establish regional networks which can oversee the pace of development in networks.

Touch points are necessary. Should the OECD have a role in looking at some of the frameworks? Successful ones are being adopted which is a positive development.

If one country aligns, is this sufficient for trust across Europe?

We need to devise a common formula to reference to EQF, not ‘back door’ alignment, to a national QF and by extension the EQF.

We should use bi-lateral agreements between EU Education and Training with other countries.

At European level mechanisms should be set-up to facilitate referencing to EQF, especially for non-member and candidate level. A comprehensive level 1 – 10 referencing approach is needed.

One of the key benefits of frameworks is the dialogue it facilitates among multiple stakeholders: institutions, agencies, government, students, employers etc. This dialogue itself is a benefit.

Cross-country global bi-lateral and multi-lateral agreements should be encouraged.
The presumption is that other regions should come to Europe, why not Europe to move out to other countries / regions?

Other global registers could be established such as those established by EQAR. Develop threshold alignment agreements to encourage broader implications of global alignment that exists in bi-lateral or multi-lateral contexts. National authorities differ per country so this needs to be taken on board.

Formal external referencing with EQF could undermine EQF. Is formal external referencing needed? Countries could make bilateral arrangements.

That is not for us to say. How external countries proceed is up to them. The EQF Advisory Group has no powers to endorse or refute alignment or references from outside (or even inside really).

Classification and recognition are competing but the alignment is more challenging:

- Requires constant support.
- Requires differentiation between different programmes and individual qualifications.

Convergence is inevitable. The pace at which it will happen will be interesting, it is in its infancy at the moment due to the increased mobility of the students due to economic conditions.

Additional table discussion

Comments

It is important to develop a system which can look at equivalent qualifications but take into account diversity and cultural difference.

There should be a re-examination of alignment of the Irish QF with the New Zealand QF, to engage European partners, to ensure that it has wide acceptance.

There is an absence of discussion of the Lisbon convention.

Plenary discussion

Pat Leahy

I suppose the question of the relevance of European frameworks for the rest of the world is something that we heard some really interesting points on from our panel earlier on, and I'd be interested in hearing if you have any responses to what the panel had to say. But I'll throw out some questions at the start anyway.

Let me ask: is it enough to focus on improving our own qualification system nationally with coordination at a European level, or do we need more active strategies for engaging with other regions of the world? I wonder would we have any ideas about what some of those strategies might be. So- does anybody want to kick off the discussion for us this morning?

Mike Coles

It’s difficult to know where to start but I thought first of all that that was a superb discussion from the panel this morning with the right kinds of plus points and the right kinds of caveats, in my personal view. But all this needs to be set in a context where the world is operating with qualifications and people moving. Big businesses are investing and moving, moving to places where they can get the skills they need, methods of identifying the skill supply levels in these countries. We have a free-flow of information around the world, we have people moving for various reasons, and so we have to open up to a world where qualifications can be compared, not necessarily recognised. These processes of recognition must always reside with the person receiving.

I’m not talking recognition here, I’m talking alignment of these frameworks. The key point I want to make is this, that what you heard from Eva this morning is echoed by other countries where they say that whether the EQF project is complete or not, we’d like these levels because they appeal across the board as a lifelong learning framework and they are already carrying some weight. We have, for example, other parts of the world where there are regional frameworks being developed like the EQF. A good example...
is the ACN framework with the southeast Asian countries.

Now, I can tell you that the processes, the criteria, the structure of this looks remarkably like the EQF ones, so what they’re saying is, we respect this structure, we respect this process, we’d like to emulate it, and of course, the next stage is, we’d like to align with it in some way.

Let’s be world citizens and just acknowledge that if you have a framework which is already dealing with 300 million people in Europe, that it might be attractive to people outside. Instead of just saying, let’s wait for these other frameworks to open up and wait for informal alignments to develop which may not be trustworthy, maybe we should say, okay, we need to have an EQF policy which is opening the door a bit and saying, if you want to align with the EQF we are going to expect this kind of approach. If criteria for that kind of approach are made explicit, then the chances are that they will be used by other people. This is good for everyone because we then get a more consistent approach.

Lucien Bollaert

Lucien Bollaert from Flanders, Belgium. Answering your question, yes, indeed, we need a European strategy for opening our work to other countries outside the European Union. We really need, let’s say, perhaps a European policy document with a draft of strategy and at this moment we don’t have such a document in Europe.

Next to that we need two formats to progress: the first one is to find a format for the alignment of frameworks outside Europe to the European Qualifications Framework, and it can start with the existing criteria for referencing and self-certification. Next to that, we also need to start the dialogue with other countries, we heard that Hong Kong and Morocco are using EQF as a window to get inside in our systems, but we need also to have some more information on their systems, and for that we need to start a dialogue.

Last but not least, the specific tools like frameworks and quality assurance are important tools to get information or a good practice in Europe. We heard that Hong Kong is interested in our VET system and Morocco is interested in our good governance. So it’s starting with a tool like the framework and it’s leading to broader issues like governance, VET systems et cetera.

Ann-Louise Gilligan

Thank you, and also very many thanks to the panel. Just one or two concerns I might have, Ann-Louise Gilligan is my name. I would like to, I suppose, understand more about the kind of mutual engagement across the world, and within Europe as we create our frameworks and as we seek to align them. In other words, I would be quite anxious that there would be any tendency, and I am not saying this is in any way explicit, that a European framework would become normative or would become a measure against which all others would be aligned.

I would just like, in relation to that point, and I am not saying that’s happening, but in relation to that point, I would love to hear more, that as countries within Europe are in fact finalising or drawing up their qualifications framework, what are they learning from other European countries in that dialogue that is influencing their own national policy on this matter?

Then with deep respect to other countries, and I loved Eva’s presentation this morning and I am going to come to one other point on that, but what are we in a European context learning from other nations in the world?

Now, in relation to Eva’s contribution, one of the questions I was left with was: why is it in a country when an opportunity is afforded - and the conversation is very much economic based, the conversation is very much aligned to employability, but why is it that when employers are invited to participate and, indeed, workers in furthering their education, as we heard, there is very little take-up in this?

So it would seem to me that aligned to our conversation here about frameworks we must constantly return to the core questions: what is the good of education? Why do we inspire people to love education? Education, as we all know, opens up windows of wonder on the world. On our table here we have Plato saying that unless education inspires to beauty it is not education at all. My point being: what is the good of education? How can we inspire, communicate to
our populations, nationally and internationally, an absolute love of learning, an absolute desire to be educated?

There’s an article in the Irish Independent today about a project in Ireland which I co-founded. We know that education is the key to the transformation of poverty. If people are not taking up opportunities and understanding the importance of frameworks and of life-long learning, there is a huge lacuna here in relation to communicating the nature of education, the good of education, and reigniting that desire.

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**Pat Leahy**

Perhaps that’s an appropriate broad and philosophical note on which to conclude this part of the discussion.
Key points from session 4

- The use of qualifications frameworks internationally can facilitate the development of educational “hubs”

- The introduction of a QF in Hong Kong has the long-term goal of increasing educational attainment

- Engagement with national and international stakeholders on the basis of qualifications frameworks increases mobility and competitiveness for individuals and industries

- The qualifications frameworks and sectoral and regional frameworks facilitate employer engagement in learning outcomes, enhancing the relevance of qualifications

- Europe's qualifications are already well regarded globally

- Further development of the European Qualifications Framework and the learning outcomes approach generates greater internal mutual trust

- Qualifications Frameworks give mutually useful tools for countries and regions to understand each others systems, at least in terms of a strategic direction and initial practice

- We need to avoid making the assumption that the EQF is the only way

- Is the EQF reaching out to other Frameworks? The EQF approach is of interest in other regions, and is respected. Should the EQF lead with setting out expectations of an approach for engagement with the alignment process? Do we need a Europe led strategy for opening our work to countries outside the Union? What is Europe learning from engagement with other QF regions?

- We need to constantly monitor internal consistency, inputs, outputs and quality assurance mechanisms.

- Dynamic engagement including of QA is needed for the alignment of frameworks, bearing in mind the relative newness of the framework initiatives.

- There is a need for consistent terminology and practices to promote clarity of purpose: are we speaking of alignment, comparison, recognition, referencing, translation devices for credit transfer, badges of approval?

- Differentiating the recognition for learning and the qualification achieved can result in very different perspectives for stakeholders. Is the EQF more useful for transparency rather than recognition purposes?

- Diverse stakeholders have different expectations. Does the OECD have a role? Are international employers interested in frameworks and levels, or does the interest lie in the combination of qualifications and experience?
Chapter 10

Session 5: Bringing home the lessons

Key issues that need to be addressed at National and EU level

Following the previous panel and round table discussions key issues were summarised and provided a basis for five breakout workshops enabled examination of the challenges and possibilities identified at national and European level. These are common issues that cross the four key themes in the conference and arose during discussions on day 1. These are listed below.

1. Data

There is challenge around the development and availability of appropriate data. The key issues centre around the capacity of systems to generate high-quality, timely and useful information to support policy-making processes.

2. Co-ordination

The need for greater coordination is a recurrent theme. The coordination challenge crosses:

- VET and HE
- education, training and the labour market
- the various QA and QF policies and agencies
- formal, non-formal and informal learning

Sometimes a lack of clarity around roles can contribute to weaknesses in integration across and implementation of policy. There is a risk that actions may not be taken up because of this.

3. Measuring Impacts and Effectiveness

A range of tools, actions and initiatives have been instigated in the areas of VET and HE QA and QF over the last 10 years. There is a requirement to establish the added value and impact of these in achieving their stated objectives. The challenge is to identify who should do this and appropriate mechanisms for measuring impacts.

4. Mutual initiatives and areas of cooperation and shared ownership

We are agreed that there must be greater cooperation between:

- VET and HE
- education, training and the labour market
- the various QA and QF policies and agencies
- formal, non-formal and informal learning

We need to incentivise, identify and create opportunities for developing and implementing good practices.

5. Filtering-down and filtering-up

The implementation of QFs and QA is highly dependent on the engagement and contribution of practitioners on the ground. They need to understand and have the tools to participate effectively. In turn their views and experiences need to feed into policy development and implementation. Practice is where policy is tested and evaluated.

6. Tension between convergence and diversity

Civilisation should be measured by the degree of diversity attained and the degree of unity retained – WH Auden

There is a tension between the desire for convergence and the maintenance of a richness of diversity. There is a requirement to focus on mutual understanding rather than harmonisation.

7. The difference between rhetoric and reality

Policy implementation needs to be fit for purpose and contextualised. Sometimes there is a risk of a disconnect between the rhetoric and reality. For example, the difference between the pace of development at a European level and at national level. There also may be too great an expectation of QFs and QA systems to deliver on objectives (e.g. mobility; trust) that are not solely embedded...
in these instruments. Both rhetoric and reality are required for progress.

8. Learner centredness

We are all agreed that learner centredness is an important orientation. It is less clear what this means and how this translates to action. There is a tendency to give voice to this in a way that is unaccountable. At a very basic level, there is a need to communicate directly with learners and this can be further extended to imply that developments and policies need to be communicable with the public in general.

9. Vision

To realise the common vision and objectives around transparency, trust and mobility, the actors responsible must understand them and be able to share and communicate them. There can be a divergence between the interpretation of this vision at system level and at institutional or agency level.

Workshops

Pat Leahy

The programme for the workshops has been based on the feedback that you provided in your table discussions. They have identified nine key issues that came up all across the tables. What we want the workshops to do is to focus on actions and solutions both at national and European level. QQI staff will be circulating and available to help everyone but it’s really up to you now, the really important part of the conference and I appeal to you to give it your full attention.

Workshop 1

Chair: Sjur Bergen

Rapporteur: Rhona Dempsey

Key topics: data, and impacts, coordination / cooperation, policy making and implementation, vision and world view

National Policy making and implementation

- Should be based on learner needs, directly informed, without lip-service; there should be evidence in practice of learners inputs, experiences, expectations and agenda in shaping programmes including duration and delivery mechanisms. How for example, are learners needs matched with employers needs?

- Employability - employers may seek a baseline qualification, but expect the skills to be reflected in the employees practice. It is easier to get a clear view of what employers want than learners. Employer’s are not necessarily concerned whether the qualification is on the Framework.

- Gap between provider and practitioners understanding of issues and need for continuous professional development for teaching.

- How do HE and VET cooperate? How much is tied to class divides, economic divides, esteem? Do our working definitions of eg VET work? Policy leadership must be informed by practitioner’s participation in debates. What measures exist to ensure that structures and practice and policy and practice work together?

- Different countries are at different stages of implementation; connections are facilitated by clear definitions.

- An umbrella body is useful in promoting communication and dissemination, including to form a learning outcomes approach and quality assurance of learning outcomes.

EU level Policymaking and implementation

- Roadmap of reforms needed to support trust

- EQF role in transparency versus recognition- a background tool. Keep purposes and expectations realistic. There are no EQF qualifications / certificates. Is the EQF a living tool or a ‘tick-box’?

- Purpose of qualification frameworks- social cohesion, communication tool: frameworks need to be formal but understandable by a broad public, including providers, employers, trade
unions, and politicians. Are qualification frameworks more owned by VET?

- Communication and dissemination is required for implementation. National actors may not know each other and may need an international context
- EQF AG should have student representative as part of partnership approach
- Learning Outcomes need more consideration
- Is there co-operation between VET and HE? Is there a class divide at perceptual level- is there also an economic divide? There are certainly ambiguities in definition of VET within HE. There is a mutual lack of knowledge and yet the issues are similar- assessment, recognition, non-formal and informal learning, and so on.
- National contexts reflect EU wide issues

Broader concerns

- What measures are there to ensure relationships between policy and practice and structures and practice- how is this maintained in practice? What measures exist to ensure coherent practice, accounting for different backgrounds and traditions?
- System and measures must have capacity to differentiate between contexts; balance between what is customised and specific and other.
- Concern that there are many learners with no real voice at all. How do you identify learner needs?

Workshop 2

Chair: Sophie Weisswange

Rapporteur: John O Connor

Topics for preferred consideration: coordination and cooperation and policy making and implementation

- NQF transparency tools provide a basis for cooperation, which must not be ‘steering from the centre’.
- Cooperation is on the basis of common interest and purpose, eg around learning outcomes. National actors should identify areas of potential common interest as a basis for co-operation and coordination.
- The logic of labour market mobility requires cooperation in order for its objectives to be achieved. This is seen as an obvious area for further co-operation, especially in countries without a tradition of strong enterprise engagement in qualifications development, delivery and evaluation.
- Validation of non-formal and informal learning requires cooperation in order to effectively implement.
- The added value of European instruments for qualifications frameworks and quality assurance should be publicly available with attendant bureaucracy minimised.
- Coordination and cooperation are based on different decision making structures in different countries.
- National priorities in the areas of frameworks and quality assurance cannot be assumed and are not heterogeneous. E.g. Poland does not view coordination of VET and HE as problematic, as both occupy different EQF levels. Switzerland with a strong VET tradition, finds integration between VET and HE problematic- it is likely that Switzerland will develop two frameworks, one for higher VET and one for HE. Policy makers at European level must understand that the challenges for coordination do not lie in the same areas across different countries.
- There was a consensus on overall European policy direction; divergence lies at national level. Consistent interpretation and implementation is not realistic.
- In order to support the coordination and cooperation at national and European level, it would be desirable to re-state the original intention of EQF as transformational instruments and for influencing reform. Frameworks are being used for different agenda but that of reform provides an imperative for cooperation and coordination.
- The conceptual framework underpinning qualifications frameworks and quality...
assurance varies across participating countries. For example, countries with strong VET systems based on partnership require NQF as an addendum for classification, not as a substitute for quality. Other framework models prioritise goals such as recognition and mobility. Dialogue around diversity of practice highlights this strength.

- A weakness of EQF implementation may lie in communications; there is a perceived disconnect between communication at EU level and at regional level. Recent surveys for EQF implementation have not sought information on weaknesses in implementation.

- EQF AG should use methodologies to gather high quality information to inform policy development- for example, are learning outcomes implemented at superficial levels or are qualifications frameworks sufficiently ambitious?

- Need to establish fora at national and European levels where there can be a frank and honest assessment about the current state of policy implementation.

- National actors responsible for policy information should develop effective and accessible dissemination strategies.

- Perception that European policy making approach in the area of qualifications and quality assurance includes elements of normative approach; data, indicators, OMC and public reporting can lead to a culture of ‘naming and shaming’ which can impact negatively on implementation of policy.

- Debate in VET and HE needs to connect to debates that are taking place in schools. This is important for lifelong learning and for realising opportunities at national and European levels.

- Co-operation between education and enterprise needs to be done on a basis of parity of esteem. HE needs to be responsive rather than responding. Industry has a pivotal role to play in curriculum development but this needs to be done on a partnership basis, need to avoid a situation where the education system provides a ‘Bachelor of Microsoft’.

- QA should evaluate the effectiveness of coordination. Industry can actively engage in QA processes; the use of internships and placements in industry are helpful.

- National authorities should review the capacity and effectiveness of local arrangements for partnerships. National frameworks of qualifications cannot address structural deficiencies where for example there is no tradition of joint ownership for employability or for validation.

Workshop 3

Chair: Mike Coles

Rapporteur: Trish O Brien


Policy and implementation

- Cedefop publication on implementation of Frameworks is due. Good repository.

- Interest in comparing different Frameworks.

- Relationship of descriptors and learning outcomes- circulated for broad debate in Norway, with new learning outcomes to emerge shortly. A research project in 2007 on how assessment is done, how it references learning outcomes. As a result of the research a new white paper is going to parliament on how assessment is practiced, policy informed by research is directing implementation. Sweden is putting its system in place incrementally, Norway by legislation.

- Sweden and Holland invite other partners to be included in the Framework and to own qualifications- can be inclusive by opening
the framework or by consulting with others—a country may design a framework and invite others to design descriptors in partnership. Opening up includes to non-formal sector. Sweden has a very unregulated labour market, but a regulated qualifications system, by social partners status in labour market is achieved through ownership, regulations differ in that it is not owned by the Ministry. Swedish question - if the framework is open to all citizens, if some stakeholders own their qualification, is it then open? If not public, is there a limitation? Is there a definition of open, if limited?

- Austria is opening up; Andorra is opening up, difficult in geographical terms, Spain, Andorra, France, have own systems of education.
- Definitions of an open framework- some consider that once a qualification is on the framework it is open to all; others say not, that it belongs to the country and to the programme
- Norway anyone can apply for a qualification, often designed by social partners. Lay down learning outcomes, legislation directs assessment; Austria, Sweden Netherlands, are all able to open up to others, but with firm parameters, acknowledgement of difference but ask that they meet the same standards. From the Swedish point of view, qualifications frameworks were never intended to just include formal systems- the vision is to increase transparency by opening up to difference qualifications. Sweden has a very unregulated labour market
- Trust in systems and creating confidence nationally- how to create a system that is inclusive and builds national trust?
- Framework needs to be owned by all actors. How to ensure shared ownership and good communication?
- Definitions of an open framework- some consider that once a qualification is on the framework it is open to all; others say not, that it belongs to the country and to the programme. Quality assurance arrangements vary if the qualifications are open to everyone, quality assurance must be centrally managed, where the qualification is local, quality assurance can be decided by the company/learning provider. Most frameworks are of the second type, multiple systems. Quality is applied to the learner, provider, the qualification owner, the assessment and the certification. Sectors may also own qualifications, for example in Sweden, sectors are invited in and demonstrate that they meet the required quality criteria; if they meet these standards, they can include qualifications in the framework. According to that proposal, an appointed state agency would be set up and a decision made by that agency. The National Council (an expert group) will make proposal to agency and the agency then decides. The agency becomes responsible to the Ministry.
- All agencies other than England and Northern Ireland are responsible to government, not to ministries. Within England and Northern Ireland, there are about 16 types of qualification, not all degrees are regulated, performance data and indicators are used to inform the comparability of standards over a number of years. There are 179 awarding organisations of varying size.
- Within England/NI there are a lot of private providers; in Sweden it is often a public domain, without private providers. There is a change from a trust system where awarding bodies were let into now needing them to meet higher standards. There is a view in Ofqual that all awards of awarding bodies should be recognised by Ofqual in order to avoid misrepresentation. Funding is a driver, power as regulator supported by government, will only get funding if qualification is regulated.
- Dutch experience was that allowing self-regulation didn't work- where eg non-formal qualifications were admitted, the match was not perfect
- Discussion around how standards are agreed for inclusion within Frameworks. Framework standards are viewed as the ones that really count.
- Quality assurance of learning outcomes—could a definition of qualification help? Should it include methods of assessment,
certification processes something that is missing? Should Cedefop examine the process to see what is effective? Within the EQF referencing material there is a section on quality assurance of outputs; quality assurance is the way that regulation takes place. Does this work for providers of qualifications outside the formal system- for example a large network of providers such as Open College?

Conclusions of workshop

- A free flow of information around systems is needed- communications matter. Quality assurance system owners and qualification frameworks need to make sure that information in Cedefop reports are distributed and need to underline the sharing of information around the system.

- Guidance on assessment and quality assurance of learning outcomes – learning outcomes have to be assessed. Should there be information on how assessment takes place- not only assessment but also how they are quality assured- a European initiative, a comparability study? A review of practice in different countries perhaps? The validation of non-formal informal learning recommendation pushes that up the agenda.

- There needs to be some attention paid at national/European level to the ways learning outcomes can be assessed –in order to show how learning outcomes that have been assessed can be recognised

- There needs to be some analysis about the way NQF’s evolve into more inclusive frameworks – a live communication issue.

- We ought to share information on guidance on requirements of NQFs – what does it require of providers/awarding bodies that interact with providers. Could this be built into one of CEDEFOP reviews?

- We need to keep looking at standards that underpin national qualifications systems – where is data? Where is evidence? Can we stand over an evidence-based system? We need to further work on standards, including a definition.

- There is also a need to explore difference between ‘INSIDE’ and ‘OUTSIDE’ frameworks, how is one different to another, could we use this language rather than regulated and unregulated?) regulated and unregulated qualifications – what are the security issues around unregulated qualifications – if qualifications bodies don’t enter framework do they need to be indicated as not being in Framework for a reason? Could it be that they just chose not to be in Framework?

- Compare the QA arrangements for qualifications inside the framework and outside the framework. A study could say what they are? Responsibility is a perceived issue here.

- What is the role of EQAVET in tightening up the rhetoric of quality assurance – need to look again at learning outcomes approach.

Workshop 4

Chair: Ana Carla Pereira

Rapporteur: Barbara Kelly

The themes for discussion included consideration at the European and national level - data, coordination, policy implementation, vision and world view. World view included the learner and globalisation.

The workshop agreed to focus on the following 3 themes:

Impact and measures/data

- We have a diverse range of instruments at European level to support transparency, recognition etc. To bring more coherence to the suite we need to look at what is common across them and to develop appropriate indicators based on this commonality. That is, we need transversal indicators.

- There is a gap in the EQF infrastructure that weakens its impact. It does not include international awards and there is no process for doing so at a European level or in a consistent way at a national level. However, millions of people hold such qualifications. Citizens do not know which are real and
which are not. Europe and member states have a duty to their citizens to sort this out. We need a medium or an entity to do so e.g. a register of international qualifications/body’s linked/aligned/referenced to EQF. The question is who should host it? The workshop felt that there may be less resistance to this at a national level now than you would think or that there would have been in the past. Member states need more effective ways to formally recognise their citizen’s skills. As more national qualification frameworks are developed the idea/initiative to include international qualifications will catch on. It was further suggested that the Commission could ascertain the level of interest at a national level via projects.

**Learner centred**

- This group noted that there is not enough information on what learners want and institutions may not be flexible enough to meet learner’s needs. What learners know about qualifications is limited.
- There is a need for greater and more consistent information regarding programmes and what they mean and where they can lead. The more information learners have the more opportunities it opens up for them. It was/is not clear who should provide this kind of information? Sometimes teachers do not know enough about the programme and the opportunities and routes it offers to learners.
- Credit may also be a solution to meeting learners needs by enabling them to learn in their own time and at their own pace.
- There is a need to get institutions more actively engaged with learning outcomes and meeting learner’s needs including in terms of offering more flexible programmes.
- It was noted that Europe has a number of tools including Europass to support learners and help providers disseminate information but these are not used to an optimum level. More needs to be done at a national and European level to demonstrate the advantages of existing tools.

**Globalisation**

- Employers want a well understood qualifications system.
- It was noted that countries are at different stages of development regarding national frameworks.
- It was noted that further discussion/debate is required regarding the impact of globalisation and the need for greater comparability of qualifications at a global level. However, the more information available regarding qualifications the better, in terms of assisting decision making at a national and individual level.
- The concept of a register could also apply to other frameworks.
- It was suggested that the EQF Advisory group’s mandate could be revised to look at international awards/other frameworks. It was noted that the EQF does not contain qualifications (only levels). However, the Diploma and Certificate Supplements are mobility tools that could/will when in greater use help disseminate EQF levels worldwide e.g. in Australia. EQF Advisory Group could also look at joint agreements/voluntary agreements with frameworks of other regions.

**Workshop 5**

**Chair: Tony Donohoe**

**Rapporteur: Deirdre Stritch**

Quality Assurance and Qualification Frameworks, working with the EQF

- Quality assurance needs to be incorporated in NQF implementation e.g. the implementation of NQFs and the learning outcomes approach should be incorporated into QA institutional reviews. Even when an NQF has not been referenced to EQF, national implementation should still proceed.
- The issue of expectations around NQFs and their ability to meet the objectives set for them (trust, transparency etc) was questioned, given that most NQFs are not...
implemented (or are only partially so) at the time of referencing to metaframeworks, and there are no commonly held understandings of what “fully implemented” means and how this is assessed.

- The Irish obligation to review the NQF (under the 1999 Act) and its implementation was viewed as very useful.

- The question was raised of how much we can evaluate impact at this stage given that NQFs are at very different stages of development.

- Practice across different countries was highlighted. Finland has not referenced its NQF to EQF and the question was raised as to why not? It had been felt that learning outcomes have been implemented in Finland for a long time and the EQF is not seen as necessary as a stimulus for national reform / implementation of NQF. There is not a strong interest in metaframeworks at the national level. In other countries, the EQF is a transformative tool, but not in this instance. Finland is already a highly regulated system and perhaps this is why the need for the EQF is not seen. The more diverse and unregulated an education system, the greater the need, perhaps, for these tools. In Lithuania, the NQF was referenced to the 2 metaframeworks and work is now progressing in putting together a system in 5 sectors to implement the national framework. Participation of different stakeholders and social dialogue is very important to NQF implementation, so there is an understanding of objectives and how they can be achieved. National training highlights the implementation of EQAVET tools.

Policy making at European, national and regional level

- There was agreement in one sub group that NQFs that are linked to QA and referenced to EQFs could be used as a future platform / quality mark to build mutual trust amongst national stakeholders. This is the vision.

- It was felt that policy making (at national and European level) can be based on 3 elements:
  - a common understanding about QFs and QA amongst different stakeholders
  - nationally and internationally; common principles and common actions.
  - Common principles of QA are not currently fully explicit in the requirements for NQF development and implementation from different countries.
  - The national self-referencing reports to EQF are not all based on common principles of QA, which makes meeting the objectives of mutual trust and understanding difficult. There was a feeling that it may be too much to ask for common principles for QA across all sectors and levels to be generated at the European level (they need to be fit-for-purpose at national level), but that this should be decided at a national level in respect of the national differences that exist.

- National referencing reports to EQF are a transparency tool. QA is not focused on the same things in the different NQFs. There is a need to be clear what QA is focusing on in each of the different reports, as they are not currently aiding transparency and mutual understanding in this regard.

Transparency and consistency in EU policy and national implementation.

- In terms of transparency, evaluation of NQFs, for example, must be done on the basis on what they were intended to do and not what the EU wants them to do as part of 2020 policy as this introduces a bias. If you want to be transparent you should know what the Commission wants when an evaluation is done. It is easier to take appropriate measure at the national level if the Commissions needs are understood.

- It was proposed that actions be costed; how much does this project (NQF development and implementation and linking to, and developing, QA systems) cost; what are the efforts that are asked by the Commission of the minister states so we can realistically budget for this.

- Consistency: it is felt that we have to keep a correct rhythm to implementing NQFs and EQF at a national level. If progress is too fast there are dangers. We should not ask too much from implementations that are at different stages; this can help us to
understand and accept diversity. There is a tension between convergence and diversity.

• It is proposed that key indicators for NQF implementation are kept simple so we can have mutual understanding of where each country is at in terms of implementation. No more than 10 indicators that can be shared. PLAs are very useful tools to improve filtering up and down information and understanding.
Chapter 11

Conference conclusions

Presentation of the conference conclusions

Gordon Clark

The team has been working on the conclusions right up to the last minute, which proves that your feedback has been fed into the process, so I now have something which is hot off the press.

My job now is to present the conclusions of the conference. I would like to thank you all for having participated so actively in the table discussions, and to thank all the speakers and panellists. It is impossible to reflect the richness of the discussions and conclusions in a short statement. So in fact there will be two outputs from this conference: there will be a complete report on the outcomes which you will receive from QQI, and there is now this set of conclusions, which is based on your feedback but which identifies and focuses on key suggestions which should be followed at the European and/or national levels, or by stakeholders. I am now going to read these conclusions to you.
Conclusions for follow-up from the Irish Presidency Conference on quality assurance in qualifications frameworks

Publication Version, 13 March 2013

European qualifications frameworks can facilitate the comparison and recognition of qualifications across Europe on the basis of mutual trust. Qualifications frameworks make credible contributions to mutual trust when they are supported by strong quality assurance systems. Only in this way can we have confidence that the qualifications are fit for purpose and that those holding qualifications can perform the tasks that society proposes to them, including participating in lifelong learning and working for others or creating new employment for themselves and others.

Over 150 delegates from over 35 countries discussed a wide range of issues over two days. The following conclusions were identified for follow-up. The proceedings will later be published in full.

1. We encourage the Commission, the European Qualifications Framework (EQF) Advisory Group and the Bologna Follow Up Group (BFUG) to look at ways of facilitating greater dialogue between the main actors in Vocational Education and Training (VET) and Higher Education (HE) on the topic of quality assurance and qualifications frameworks. The EQF Advisory Group and the BFUG working group on structural reforms, in co-operation with ENQA and EQAVET, should review and make proposals to strengthen the common principles of quality assurance to be applied across HE and VET, such as found in Annex 3 to the EQF Recommendation.

2. Providers in the VET and HE sectors and their respective public authorities are urged to make their quality assurance arrangements mutually intelligible, to share good practices across sectors and to learn about each other’s approaches to implementing learning outcomes.

3. Those charged with the revision of the European Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in Higher Education should incorporate reference to NQFs based on learning outcomes.

4. Similarly, the current evaluation of EQAVET should be a launchpad to reinforce the implementation of learning outcomes and National Qualifications Frameworks (NQFs) to improve programmes and generate more widespread trust in VET qualifications. The Commission should explore how to give greater international transparency and comparability to diverse quality assurance systems used in VET throughout Europe.

5. We call on national authorities to communicate more effectively the quality assurance and qualifications instruments developed at a European level to education and training providers in order to change the cultures of pedagogy and practice in their systems. The authorities should also evaluate the effectiveness of such communications efforts.

6. Member states should ensure that the initial and continuing formation of teachers, trainers and lecturers should develop the competence of educators in the use of the learning outcomes paradigm to promote student-centred learning. The Commission, working with the Thematic Network on Teacher Education in Europe, should examine
how best to promote the implementation of this recommendation.

7. Employers, especially through their intermediate bodies, should express their skills needs and assist the bodies responsible for qualifications and NQFs to ensure that these needs are reflected in qualifications.

8. Feedback from employers and other social partners, as well as from learners, is critical to ensuring that the quality assurance systems function effectively. We call on employers, individually and through their intermediate bodies, to participate in local internal quality assurance of education and training providers and in the external quality assurance systems organised at national or other levels. We consider however that providers of education and training must in turn match the commitment of employers by responding to the feedback received.

9. Member states should design or extend their NQFs to accommodate quality assured qualifications arising from outside current formal systems. The Commission, with the EQF Advisory Group, should explore methods to ensure coherent alignment of international qualifications with NQFs and EQF.

10. Empowerment of various stakeholders in the education and training systems in framework development and implementation is an essential feature of the European model. Public authorities, providers, and social partners in member states are encouraged to support similar developments in other regions through taking part in bilateral and multilateral projects and initiatives. The Commission, with EQF Advisory Group and European Training Foundation, is asked to consider how best to respond to requests from countries outside the Education and Training 2020 Policy Cooperation to demonstrate the affinity of their NQFs to the EQF. National qualifications authorities and their European counterparts are urged to support measures that enhance mutual recognition of qualifications between Europe and the rest of the world. We support the proposal that a bridging declaration on the recognition of qualifications between Europe and Asia be brought to the Fourth Asia-Europe Meeting of Ministers of Education in May 2013.

11. We look forward to the Commission follow-up to the communication *Rethinking Education* in particular the European Area of Skills and Qualifications which aims to increase synergies between transparency tools. We encourage member states and other stakeholders to participate in this debate.
So those are the conclusions which have been drawn with follow up points. A few final words before I hand over to our final speaker. Just to say that Irish Presidency has been very pleased to host this conference and to welcome you all from over 35 countries to Dublin Castle. We strongly believe in the integration of qualifications across different sectors of education and training as a key to lifelong learning. We consider that a joined up policy approach to quality assurance is necessary to achieve such integration and we are very grateful to you as delegates and speakers for having actually actively helped to push this agenda forward.

Finally, I would like to pay particular thanks to Padraig Walsh, the Chief Executive of QQI, Bryan Maguire and all of the QQI team who have been mobilised and who have worked so hard and so well to make this conference such a success.

Now I would like to hand over to Ana Carla Pereira, who is Head of Unit in the Directorate General for Education and Culture, responsible for skills and qualification strategies and multilingualism policy, who is going to close the conference.
Ana Carla Pereira, DG Education and Culture

Thank you, Gordon, you already gave me all the homework I have to do as Chair of EQF Advisory Group, and the challenge is quite big for this afternoon to see how we take up all the messages brought by the Presidency after the discussions. I am not sure I am going to conclude, because it’s very hard to conclude. The conversations have been very rich, so maybe some impressions and sort of feedback of what we take from this conference will be useful.

We heard yesterday the staggering figures of 25 million unemployed, 2 million unfulfilled vacancies, 70 million low skilled adults, and someone in the audience mentioned the issue of early school leaving as a very urgent one to be solved. We have agreed that qualifications frameworks and quality assurance is not a panacea for you all, there are policies in the area of employment that have to be put in place. There are policies, economic policies, that have to be put in place to promote economic growth, so we should not bear on our shoulders the entire responsibility of the economic crisis that the EU is currently undergoing. However, the question is: are qualifications and education doing their bit towards the cure? We seem to agree that an effective treatment from the education perspective must put the learner at the centre. We have to move to a more learner centred approach and we should ask ourselves: what do learners want?

We have heard from the audience yesterday that we have a diverse group of learners. The idea of a 20 year-old in university undertaking his masters is no longer a complete picture of reality. You have diversity across nationalities. In your campuses you have diversity across ages, you have people who do not go to campuses in universities but they simply learn on-line.

We also know that life is no longer a linear succession of school, work and retirement. This seems to have been the model of success in the 60s, but this is no longer the case for us and for the younger generations that will have to go into an active life.

We also know that learners are looking for more flexibility, they are looking to move from one education sector to the other, and yesterday there was a controversial moment where someone said that there is no movement form higher education to VET. I think the reactions in the room were clear enough, that these are misconceptions of what is going on in reality. There is movement across sectors and there is movement across sectors within the economy. Someone that studies today to be a biologist probably will start in a pharmaceutical company and then five years later will want to move to a chemical company, God knows what can happen in this career path.

We also know that young learners are more conscious of the value they want to take out of their learning. This is both for employability but also to be active citizens in life. Are we meeting these needs? Are we meeting the needs of learners? I think the conference shows that we still have some progress to make and that we are still far away from dealing with these concerns in a concrete manner.

The most striking feature for us out of this conference was the difficulty of the conversations between people of different sectors. We were at different tables and when we were addressing the issues at stake the communication flow was good, we could say we share the same concerns. Then when we discuss tools and ways of implementing, then suddenly there is no communication. The question for us is whether diversity is being created by processes, by mechanisms that we have installed in the way of dealing with these things, or does this diversity truly reflect reality? Are the issues in VET and higher education so different that we are not capable of talking to each other?

I believe the discussions showed that there are common issues and we should really thank the Presidency for having us here and for the opportunity for this exchange, because this is the value we can take home, it is the exchange that
has happened over these two days and realising that actually more has to be done in order to make people communicate across the different sectors.

The second striking feature, at least for me, is the fact that we tend to focus our discussions on concepts and we use jargon that is very far away from what people outside of this room could understand, from what learners could understand. For example, we heard yesterday, what is informal learning, what is non-formal learning, what is the difference? But someone said, does it really matter, should we be discussing this or should we be discussing how the needs of individual pathways need to be catered for in terms of flexibility and modularisation. If we really want to have the learner at the centre, we have to move from conceptual discussions to something that is really tangible to citizens. I would say that if we don’t do this then we are not providing the right framework conditions for people to take informed decisions, we are not doing our job in terms of allowing each learner to have all the required information to make their choices.

The third element that was quite compelling to me throughout these two days, and it has been mentioned already this morning, is probably the difference between rhetoric and reality. We have heard that policy making sometimes goes ahead of implementation and it is important to give the time for implementation to happen, otherwise things move too fast and they will remain in the offices and in the administrations of our agencies and ministries but they will not be mirrored in schools, in universities, in training institutions.

I would warn, however, that the world is actually changing very rapidly and there is a bigger danger here, is that actually reality goes much faster than policy making and that one day reality hits us in the face, saying, well, actually you’ve been doing this for the last decade but the world have moved along. I will just give you three examples:

The first example is the exponential growth of the massive open on-line courses. In the last two years the amount of universities that have started to put their courses on-line is quite impressive. No one knows what will be the future of this movement, but certainly it will shape the way universities deliver their courses. Are our quality assurance systems ready to cater for that change?

Second example: many universities are opening branches and campuses outside the country of origin and many universities are now adopting strategies of internationalisation to go overseas and they actually open somewhere else, either in Europe or across the world, new campuses, where they will deliver new training. So is quality assurance just a national issue? Are we ready to accept that there are cross-border issues related to quality assurance?

Third example: international qualifications, we have spoken about this. If we think about the millions of people that actually hold qualifications given by private providers and that are given by providers that act globally, are our national qualifications fit for purpose to cater for this new reality?

So, I would say that the world is changing very fast and if we don’t have this sense of urgency that we need also to capture this reality in the things we do, well we will have difficulties. I have looked at the conclusions of the presidency conference of 2004, you have them in your booklet, it’s actually quite interesting reading because if you go through those points you will see this was already an issue 10 years ago. What have we done since then?

Many of the things that we have discussed here today were already present. Probably the big difference, and a considerable one, is that in these ten years we have qualifications frameworks that 10 years ago did not exist. And this gives us the conditions to act more quickly and this is the foundation now for a new rhythm and to move one gear up. So this is what we feel, that now it is time, because we have some foundation of qualifications frameworks, of quality assurance, of credit systems, it is now time to move one gear up and see what we can do in terms of adapting to what reality is asking us for.

Moving one gear up for us requires certainly more work on learning outcomes. There might be some qualms still among a few of you around the issue of learning outcomes but for us there seems to be a general consensus that learning outcomes are the core instrument which allow
different actors to communicate. Of course a stronger focus on learning outcomes obliges us to think of what is required, and this is a very difficult question because some will argue it is not what employers want, others will say it needs to be more focused on the needs of the labour market.

What is to be assessed? And here we really plug into the pedagogical approaches and the way teaching and learning happens in the classroom and how it can be achieved. So what is the role of practitioners, of teachers in making the learning outcomes happen in the classroom?

A second element I would say to foster this sense of urgency and to make things move is certainly a stronger dialogue with employers and social partners, we have discussed this yesterday. But possibly there are two ways, this is a two-way dialogue. One way is to make sure that employers and social partners have a more active role in developing the curricula. This is particularly important in VET. And the cases where VET has been most successful, in the countries where it has been most successful, for example in Germany or in Austria, it is clear that the role of employers is at the centre of how VET is taught and how the curriculum is developed.

A second way of engaging with employers is not only involving them in this process but is also informing them of what is happening. It is really rare to see, for example, people from public employment services or employers know what the qualifications frameworks are. This is still very much an unknown area for many people outside education and training, it is important to make this effort of communication.

The third and final thing I would say; a point that we need to concentrate on and to make an effort on is this issue of flexibility. Catering for flexibility of individual pathways and here the focus of looking into units of learning versus programmes is a central one and this is something that we are not going to solve in one day but is something that is required by our learners today. Flexibility also means more dialogue between the sectors and certainly a better link between what happens in formal education and what happens outside of the schools and of universities.

I wanted to conclude just to say, what are we doing in the Commission around these things? We will clearly have a lot of tasks in front of us if we take all the actions that are proposed by the conference statement, but just to give you an idea of a few things that are already in the pipeline. The first one, we have settled with the EQF Advisory Group a two-year work programme around learning outcomes, so we have collected all the information that has been developed so far around learning outcomes and proposed a number of activities around this issue in a work programme that is supposed to deliver results in two years, so I hope that in two years I will be able to say something that responds to my questions today. I am not sure we will be successful but we will certainly try.

The second thing I wanted to mention is that we are really making an effort at bridging the communication gap between the world of education and the world of work. You might already know projects like ESCO, which are fundamental to having a common language or a translation device between the things we say in education and the things that people that work in employment say.

We should also mention the skill councils. The skills councils are formations at European level by social partners where social partners try to identify what are the skills needed in a particular sector. Something that you might be less acquainted with are the Knowledge Alliances and the Sector Skills Alliances that will be funded through a new programme. The alliances are meant to help the dialogue at a national or regional level between education and training institutions and business in this need to bridge and to make this dialogue more effective.

Finally, I could not end this without talking about the European Area for Skills and Qualifications. You are aware that many of the European tools for transparency and recognition are being subjects of evaluations. We have an evaluation on EQF, we have an evaluation of EQAVET, of ECVET, on quality assurance in higher education, on ENQA, so there are a number of evaluation processes that are going on and they will bring some results this year. We believe that it is time now to give a new input to the developments that have been undertaken for the last decade and try to answer some of the questions that have been raised these last two days through a programme that brings more synergy and convergence of
the different tools across sectors, across formal, non-formal and informal learning. It also must allow us and Member States to have ways of communicating more clearly to the citizens of what is it, for example, an EQF level if they would have it in their CV, in their diplomas.

So the European Area for Skills and Qualifications is our attempt to give a new impetus. It is not about creating new things, it’s not about creating new instruments, but is certainly looking at what we have today and making sure that we move towards more flexible ways of delivering teaching and learning, that we move to something that is more aligned to the needs of the learners. We certainly count on Member States and you to go with us through this process of analysing what is currently available and what we could do better.

After the summer we will officially launch a public debate and we will come to all the sorts of groups that we have. For one reason or another, these groups don’t really communicate with each other but we will come to all these groups and have a debate about what could be the next steps in terms of transparency and recognition at European level.

So I will just finalise and thank the Presidency for the excellent organisation for this conference, I believe we have all learned a lot. Every one of us takes something home, and that is an important thing. And I think we have all enjoyed also the social part, which is always a very welcome one. Thank you very much.

End of Conference
### Appendix: Conference delegates

**St. Patrick’s Hall, Dublin Castle**

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